DECEMBER

Weird Tales

25c

The Sea-Witch

By NICTZIN DYALHIS

Seabury Quinn

Robert Bloch

Edmond Hamilton

Mary E. Counselman

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THAT HAS
ENDURED WITH THE
PYRAMIDS

A SECRET METHOD FOR THE MASTERY OF LIFE

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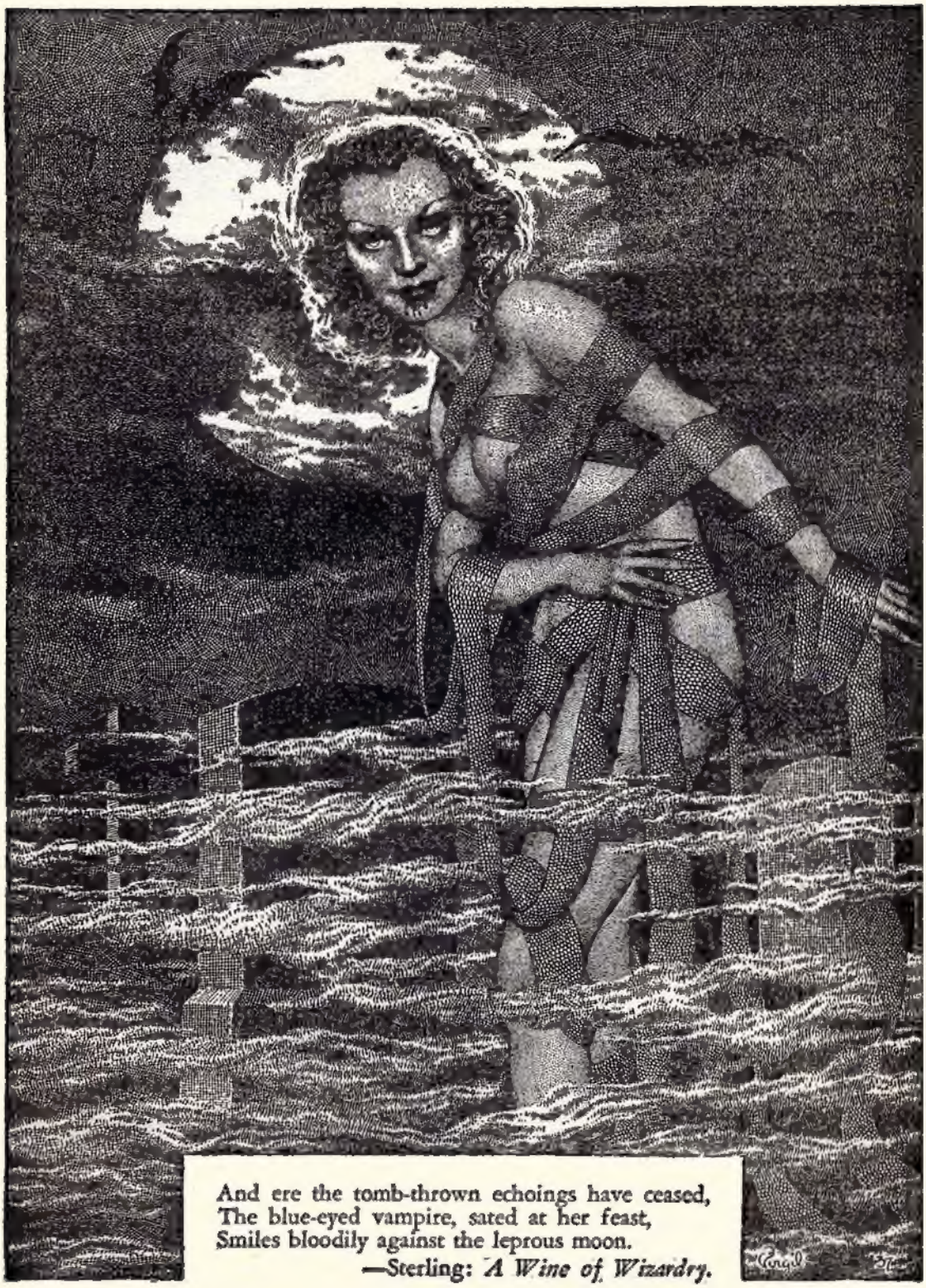

And ere the tomb-thrown echoings have ceased,
The blue-eyed vampire, sated at her feast,
Smiles bloodily against the leprous moon.
—Sterling: *A Wine of Wizardry.*

A MAGAZINE OF THE BIZARRE AND UNUSUAL

Weird Tales

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

"By the power I hold, I call you forth from your hiding-place of flesh—come ye out."

The Sea-Witch

By NICTZIN DYALHIS

Out of the sea she came, this gloriously beautiful woman, to compass a weird revenge that had been too long delayed—a saga of Heldra the lovely, Heldra the wicked, written by the author of "When the Green Star Waned"

HELDRA HELSTROM entered my life in a manner peculiarly her own. And while she was the most utterly damnable woman in all the world, at the same time, in my opinion, she was the sweetest and the most superbly lovely woman who ever lived.

A three-day northeast gale was hammering at the coast. It was late in the fall of the year, and cold as only our

North Atlantic coast can very well be, but in the very midst of the tempest I became afflicted with a mild form of claustrophobia. So I donned sea-boots, oil-skins and sou'wester hat, and sallied forth for a walk along the shore.

My little cottage stood at the top of a high cliff. There was a broad, safe path running down to the beach, and down it I hurried. The short winter day was even then drawing to a close, and after I'd trudged a quarter of a mile along the shore, I decided I'd best return to my comfortable fireside. The walk had at least given me a good appetite.

There was none of the usual lingering twilight of a clear winter evening. Darkness fell so abruptly I was glad I'd brought along a powerful flashlight. I'd almost reached the foot of my path up the cliff when I halted, incredulous, yet desiring to make sure.

I turned the ray of the flashlight on the great comber just curling to break on the shore, and held the light steady, my breath gasping in my throat. Such a thing as I thought I'd seen couldn't be—yet it was!

I started to run to the rescue, and could not move a foot. A power stronger than my own will held me immovable. I could only watch, spellbound. And even as I stared, that gigantic comber gently subsided, depositing its precious living burden on the sands as softly as any nurse laying a babe into a cradle.

Waist-deep in a smother of foam she stood for a brief second, then calmly waded ashore and walked with free swinging stride straight up the beam of my flashlight to where I stood.

Regardless of the hellish din and turmoil of the tempest, I thrilled, old as I am, at the superb loveliness of this most amazing specimen of flotsam ever a raging sea cast ashore within memory of man.

Never a shred of clothing masked her matchless body, yet her flesh glowed rosy-white, when by all natural laws it should have been blue-white from the icy chill of wintry seas.

"Well!" I exclaimed. "Where did *you* come from? Are you real—or am I seeing that which is not?"

"I am real," replied a clear, silvery voice. "And I came from out there." An exquisitely molded arm flung a gesture toward the raging ocean. "The ship I was on was sinking, so I stripped off my garb, flung myself on Ran's bosom, and Ran's horses gave me a most magnificent ride! But well for you that you stood still as I bade you, while I walked ashore. Ran is an angry god, and seldom well-disposed toward mortals."

"Ran?" The sea-god of the old Norse vikings! What strange woman was this, who talked of "Ran" and his "horses," the white-maned waves of old ocean? But then I bethought me of her naked state in that unholy tempest.

"Surely you must be Ran's daughter," I said. "That reef is ten miles off land! Come—I have a house near by, and comforts—you cannot stand here."

"Lead, and I will follow," she replied simply.

She went up that path with greater ease than I, and walked companionably beside me from path-top to house, although she made no talk. Oddly, I felt that she was reading me, and that what she read gave her comfort.

When I opened the door, it seemed as if she held back for a merest moment.

"Enter," I bade her, a bit testily. "I should think you'd had enough of this weather by now!"

She bowed her head with a natural stateliness which convinced me that she was no common person, and murmured something too low for me to catch, but

the accents had a distinct Scandinavian trend.

"What did you say?" I queried, for I supposed she'd spoken to me.

"I invoked the favor of the old gods on the hospitable of heart, and on the sheltering rooftree," she replied. Then she crossed my threshold, but she reached out her arm and rested her shapely white hand lightly yet firmly on my left forearm as she stepped within.

She went direct to the big stove, which was glowing dull-red, and stood there, smiling slightly, calm, serene, wholly ignoring her nakedness, obviously enjoying the warmth, and not by a single shiver betraying that she had any chill as result of exposure.

"I think you need this," I said, proffering a glass of brandy. "There's time enough for exchanging names and giving explanations, later," I added. "But right now, I'll try and find something for you to put on. I have no women's things in the house, as I live alone, but will do the best I can."

I passed into my bedroom, laid out a suit of pajamas and a heavily quilted bathrobe, and returned to the living-room where she stood.

"You are a most disconcertingly beautiful young woman," I stated bluntly; "which you know quite well without being told. But doubtless you will feel more at ease if you go in there and don some things I've laid out for you. When you come out, I'll get some supper ready."

She was back instantly, still unclad. I stared, wonderingly.

"Those things did not fit," she shrugged. "And that heavy robe—in this warm house?"

"But——" I began.

"But—*this,*" she smiled, catching up a crimson silk spread embroidered in gold, which covered a sandalwood table I'd brought from the orient many years before. A couple of swift motions and the gorgeous thing became a wondrous robe adorning her lovely figure, clinging, and in some subtle manner hinting at the flawless splendor of her incomparable body. A long narrow scarf of black silk whereon twisted a silver dragon was whipped from its place on a shelf and transposed into a sash from her swelling breasts to her sloping hips, bringing out more fully every exquisite curve of her slender waist and torso—and she smiled again.

"Now," she laughed softly, "am I still a picture for your eyes? I hope so, for you have befriended me this night—I who sorely need a friend; and it is such a little thing I can do—making myself pleasing in your sight.

"And because you have holpen me"—I stared at the archaic form she used—"and will continue to aid and befriend (for so my spirit tells me), I will love you always, love you as Ragnar Wave-Flame loved Jarl Wulf Red-Brand . . . as a younger sister, or a dutiful niece."

"Yet of her it is told," I interrupted, deliberately speaking Swedish and watching keenly to see the effect, "that the love given by the foam-born Sea-Witch brought old Earl Wulf of the Red-Sword but little luck, and that not of a sort desired by most men!"

"That is ill said," she retorted. "His fate was from the Norns, as is the fate of all. Not hers the fault of his doom, and when his carles within the hour captured his three slayers, she took red vengeance. With her own foam-white hands she flayed them alive, and covered their twitching bodies with salt ere she placed the old Jarl in his long-ship and set it afire. And she sailed with that old man on his last seafaring, steering his blazing dragon-ship out of the stead, singing of his great deeds in life, that

the heroes in Valhalla might know who honored them by his coming."

She paused, her superb bosom heaving tumultuously. Then with a visible effort she calmed herself.

"But you speak my tongue, and know the old tales of the Skalds. Are you, then, a Swede?"

"I speak the tongue, and the old tales of the Skalds, the ancient minstrels, I learned from my grandmother, who was of your race."

"Of my race?" her tone held a curious inflection. "Ah, yes! All women are of one race . . . perhaps."

"But I spoke of supper," I said, moving toward the kitchen.

"But—no!" She barred my progress with one of her lovely hands laid flat against my chest. "It is not meet and fitting, Jarl Wulf, that you should cook for me, like any common house-carle! Rather, let your *niece*, Heldra, prepare for you a repast."

" 'Heldra'? That, then, is your name?"

"Heldra Helstrom, and your loving niece," she nodded.

"But why call me Jarl Wulf?" I demanded, curious to understand. She had bestowed the name seriously, rather than in playful banter.

"Jarl Wulf you were, in a former life," she asserted flatly. "I knew you on the shore, even before Ran's horse stood me on my feet!"

"Surely, then, you must be Ragnar Wave-Flame born again," I countered.

"How may that be?" she retorted. "Ragnar Wave-Flame never died; and surely I do not look that old! The sea-born witch returned to the sea-caves whence she came, when the dragon-ship burned out. . . . But ask me not of myself, now.

"Yet one thing more I will say: The warp and woof of this strange pattern wherein we both are depicted was woven of the Norns ere the world began. We have met before—we meet again, here and now—we shall meet yet again; but how, and when, and where, I may not say."

"Of a truth, you are 'fey'," I muttered.

"At times—I am," she assented. Then her wondrous sapphire eyes gleamed softly into my own hard gray eyes, her smile was tender, wistful, womanly, and my doubts were dissipated like wisps of smoke. Yet I shook an admonitory forefinger at her:

"Witch at least I know you to be," I said in mock harshness. "Casting *glamyr* on an old man."

"No need for witchery," she laughed. "All women possess that power!"

DURING the "repast" she spread before me, I told her that regardless of who I might have been in a dim and remote past of which I had no memory, in this present life I was plain John Craig, retired professor of anthropology, ethnology and archeology, and living on a very modest income. I explained that while I personally admired her, and she was welcome to remain in my home for ever, yet in the village near by were curious minds, and gossiping tongues, and evil thoughts a-plenty, and if I were to tell the truth of her arrival——

"But I have nowhere to go, and none save you to befriend me; all I loved or owned is out there." Again she indicated the general direction of the reef. "And you say that I may remain here, indefinitely? I will be known as your niece, Heldra, no? Surely, considering the differences in our age and appearance, there can be no slander."

Her eyes said a thousand things no words could convey. There was eagerness, sadness, and a strange tenderness. . . . I came to an abrupt decision. After all, whose business was it? . . .

"I am alone in the world, as you are," I said gravely. "As my niece, Heldra, you shall remain. If you will write out a list of a woman's total requirements in wearing-apparel, I will send away as soon as possible and have them shipped here in haste. I am old, as all can see, and I do not think any sensible persons will suspect aught untoward in your making your home with me. And I will think up a plausible story which will satisfy the minds of fools without telling, in reality, anything."

Our repast ended, we arose from the table and returned to the living-room. I filled and lighted a *nargilyeh,* a three-stemmed water-pipe, and settled myself in my armchair. She helped herself to a cigarette from a box on the table, then stretched her long, slender body at full length on my divan, in full relaxation of comfort.

I told her enough of myself and my forebears to insure her being able to carry out the fiction of being my niece. And in return I learned mighty little about her. But what she did tell me was sufficient. I never was unduly curious about other people's business.

Unexpectedly, and most impolitely, I yawned. Yet it was natural enough, and it struck me that she needed a rest, if anyone ever did. But before I could speak, she forestalled me.

With a single graceful movement she rose from her reclining posture and came and stood before me within easy arm's-reach. Two swift motions, and her superb body flashed rosy-white, as nude as when she waded ashore.

The crimson silken spread she'd worn as regally as any robe was laid at my feet with a single gesture, the black scarf went across my knees, and the glorious creature was kneeling before me in attitude of absolute humility. Before I could remonstrate or bid her arise, her silvery voice rang softly, solemnly, like a muted trumpet:

"Thus, naked and with empty hands, out of the wintry seas in a twilight gray and cold, on a night of storm I came. And you lighted a beacon for my tired eyes, that I might see my way ashore. You led me up the cliff and to your hospitable hearth, and in your kindly heart you had already given the homeless a home.

"And now, kneeling naked before you, as I came, I place my hands between your hands—thus—and all that I am, and such service as I can render, are yours, handfasted."

I stared, well-nigh incredulous. In effect, in the old Norse manner, she was declaring herself to all intents and purposes my slave! But her silvery voice went on:

"And now, I rise and cover myself again with the mantle of your bounty, that you may know me, indeed your niece, as Jarl Wulf knew Ragnar Wave-Flame!"

"Truly," I gasped in amazement when I could catch my breath, "you are a strange mixture of the ancient days and this modern period. I have known you but for a few hours, yet I feel toward you as that old Jarl must have felt toward that other sea-witch, unless indeed you and she are one!"

"Almost," she replied a trifle somberly. "At least, she was my ancestress!" Then she added swiftly: "Do not misunderstand. Leman to the old Jarl she never was. But later, after he went to Valhalla, in the sea-girt isle where she dwelt she mated with a young viking whom Ran had cast ashore sorely wounded and insensible. She nursed him back to life for sake of his beauty, and he made love to her.

"But he soon tired of her and her witch ways; wherefore, in wrath she gave him back to Ran—and he was seen no

more. Of that mating was born a daughter, also given to Ran, who pitied her and bore her to an old man and his wife whose steading was nigh to the mouth of a fjord; and they, being childless, called her Ranhild, and reared her as their daughter. In course of time, she wed, and bore three tall sons and a daughter. . . .

"That was long and long ago—yet I have dived into Ragnar's hidden sea-cave and talked with Ragnar Wave-Flame face to face. All one night I lay in her arms, and in the dawning she breathed her breath on my brow, lips, and bosom; and all that following day she talked and I listened, and much I learned of the wisdom that an elder world termed witchcraft."

For a moment she lapsed into silence. Then she leaned forward, laid her shapely, cool hands on my temples and kissed me on my furrowed old forehead, very solemnly, yet with ineffable gentleness.

"And now," she murmured, "ask me never again aught concerning myself, I pray you; for I have told all I may, and further questioning will drive me back to the sea. And I would not have that happen—yet!"

Without another word she turned, flung herself at full length again on the divan, and, like any tired child, went instantly to sleep. Decidedly, I thought, this "niece" of mine was not as are other women; and later I found that she possessed certain abilities it is well for the world that few indeed can wield.

She gave me another proof of that belief, by demonstrating her unholy powers, on the night of the next full moon after her arrival.

It was her custom of an evening to array herself as she had done on her first night—in crimson robe and black sash and naught else, despite the fact that her wardrobe which I had ordered from the great city forty miles away contained all any woman's heart could wish for. But I admit I enjoyed seeing her in that semi-barbaric attire.

At times she would sit on the arm of my chair, often with her smooth cool cheek laid against my rough old face, and her exquisitely modeled arm curved about my leathery old neck. The first time she had done that, I had demanded ironically:

"Witch, are you making love to me?"

But her sighing, wistful reply had disarmed me, and likewise had brought a lump into my throat.

"Nay! Not that, O Jarl from of old! But—I never knew a father."

"Nor I a fair daughter," I choked. And thereafter, when that mood was upon her I indulged in no more ironies, and we'd sit for hours, neither speaking, engrossed in thoughts for which there are no words. But on the night whereof I write, she pressed her scarlet lips to my cheek, and I asked jestingly:

"Is there something you want, Heldra?"

"There is," she replied gravely. "Will you get a boat—one with oars and a sail, but no engine? Ran hates those."

"But surely you do not want it now, tonight, do you?"

"Yes, if you will be so kind to me."

"You must have a very good reason, or you'd not ask," I said. "I'll go and get a centerboard dory and bring it to the beach at the foot of the cliff path. It's clear weather, and the sea is calm, with but a moderate breeze blowing; yet it is colder on the water than you imagine, so you'd best bundle up warmly."

"You will hasten," she implored anxiously.

"Surely," I nodded.

I went out and down to the wharves in the village, where I kept the boat I said

I'd get. But when I beached the dory at foot of the path I stared, swearing softly under my breath. Not one stitch of apparel did that witch have on, save the crimson silk robe and black sash she'd worn when I left the cottage!

"Do you want to freeze?" I was provoked, I admit. "The very sight of you dressed like that gives me the shivers!"

"Neither you nor I will be cold this night," she laughed. "Isn't it glorious? And this is a good boat you brought. Please, let me sail it, and ask me no questions."

She took the tiller, hauled in on the sheet; the sail filled, and she began singing, with a queer, wild strain running through her song. That dory fairly flew —and I swear there was not enough wind to drive us at such speed.

Finally I saw something I didn't admire. No one does, who dwells on that part of the coast.

"Are you crazy, girl?" I demanded sharply. "That reef is dead ahead! Can't you see the breakers?"

"Why, so it is—the reef! And am *I* to be affrighted by a few puny breakers? Nay, it is in the heart of those breakers that I wish to be! But you—have *you* fear, O Jarl Wulf?"

I suspected from her tone that the witch was laughing at me; so I subsided, but fervently wished that I'd not been so indulgent of her whim for a moonlight sail on a cold winter's night.

Then we hit those breakers—or rather, we didn't! For they seemed to part as the racing dory sped into them, making a smooth clear lane of silvery glinting water over which we glided as easily as if on a calm inland mill-pond!

"Drop the sail and unstep the mast," she called suddenly.

I was beyond argument, and obeyed dumbly, like any boat-carle of the olden days.

"Now, take to the oars," she directed, "and hold the boat just hereabouts for a while," and even as I slid the oars into the oarlocks she made that swift movement of hers and stood nude, the loveliest sight that grim, ship-shattering, life-destroying reef had ever beheld.

Suddenly she flung up both shapely white arms with a shrill, piercing cry, thrice repeated. Then without a word she went overside in a long clean dive, with never a splash to show where she'd hit the water.

"Hold the boat about here for a while," she'd bidden me! All I'd ever loved in this world was somewhere down below, in the hellish cross-currents of that icy water! I'd hold that boat there, if need were, in the teeth of a worse tempest than raged the night she came to me. She'd find me waiting. And if she never came up, I'd hold that boat there till its planks rotted and I joined her in the frigid depths.

It seemed an eternity, and I know that it was an hour ere a glimmer of white appeared beneath the surface. Then her shapely arm emerged and her hand grasped the gunwale, her regal head broke water, she blew like a porpoise; then she laughed in clear ringing triumph.

"You old *dearling!*" she cried in her archaic Norse. "Did I seem long gone? The boat has not moved a foot from where I dove. Come, bear a hand and lift my burden; it is heavy, and I am near spent. There are handles by which to grasp it."

The burden proved to be a greenish metal coffer—bronze, I judged—which I estimated to measure some twenty inches long by twelve wide and nine inches deep. And how she rose to the surface weighted with that, passes my understanding. But how she knew it was down there passes my comprehension, too. But

then, Heldra Helstrom herself was an enigma.

She re-wrapped herself in her flimsy silken robe of crimson and smiled happily, when she should have been shivering almost to pieces.

"If you'll ship the mast and spread the sail again, Uncle John," she said, surprizingly matter-of-fact now that her errand was successfully accomplished, "we'll go home. I'd like a glass of brandy and a smoke, myself; and I read in your mind that such is your chief desire, at present."

BACK at the cottage again, and comfortable once more, Heldra requested me to bear the coffer into her room, which I did. For over an hour she remained in there, then returned to the living-room where I sat, and I stared at the picture she presented. If she had always been beautiful, now she was surpassingly glorious.

Instead of the usual crimson robe, her lovely body was sheathed in a sleeveless, sheer, tightly fitting silken slip, cut at the throat in a long sloping V reaching nearly to her waist. The garment was palest sea-green, so flimsy in texture that it might as well have been compounded of mingled moon-mist and cobwebs. Her rosy-pearl flesh gleamed through the fabric with an alluring shimmer which thrilled anew my jaded old senses at the artistic wonder of her.

A gold collar, gem-studded, unmistakably of ancient Egyptian workmanship, was resting on her superb shoulders—loot of some viking foray into the far Southlands, doubtless. A broad girdle of gold plates, squared, and also gem-studded, was about her sloping hips, and was clasped in front by a broader plate with a sun-emblem in jeweled sets; from which plate or buckle it fell in two broad bands nearly to her white slender feet.

Broad torques of gold on upper arms and about her wrists, and an intricately wrought golden tiara with disks of engraved gold pendent by chains and hanging over her ears, set off her loveliness as never before. Even her red-gold hair, braided in two thick ropes, falling over her breasts to below her waist, were clasped by gem-set brooches of gold.

"Ragnar Wave-Flame's gift to me, O Jarl Wulf," she breathed softly. "Do you like your niece thus arrayed?"

Norse princess out of an elder day, or Norse witch from an even older and wickeder period of the world—whichever this Heldra Helstrom was, of one thing I was certain, no lovelier woman ever lived than this superb being who styled herself my "niece."

And so I told her, and was amply rewarded by the radiance of her smile, and the ecstatic kiss she implanted on my cheek.

Despite her splendid array, she perched on the arm of my chair, and began toying with my left hand. Presently she lifted it to the level of my eyes, laughing softly. I'd felt nothing, yet she'd slipped a broad tarnished silver ring of antique design on my third finger.

"It was yours in the ancient days, O Jarl Wulf," she whispered in her favorite tongue—the archaic form of the Norsk language. "Yours again is the ancient ring, now! Ragnar herself carved the mystic runes upon it. Shall I read them, O Jarl, or will you?"

"They are beyond my skill," I confessed. "The words are in the 'secret' language that only the '*Rime-Kanaars*' understood. Nor was it well for others than witches and warlocks to seek to understand them."

"Ragnar took that ring from Jarl Wulf's finger ere she set fire to the dragon-ship," Heldra murmured. "Had those runes been on the ring when your foes set upon you—they, not you, would

have perished in the sword-play, Jarl Red-Sword!

"But the sea-born witch knew that you would weary of Valhalla in a day to come, and would return to this world of strife and slaying, of loss and grief, of hate and the glutting of vengeance—and, knowing, she carved the runes, that in time the charmed ring would return to its proper owner.

"It is her express command that I read them to you, for knowing the runes, never shall water drown or fire burn; nor sword or spear or ax ever wound you, so be it that in time of danger you speak the weird words!

"And for my sake—you who are my 'Uncle John' to all the rest of the world, but to me are dearer than old Jarl Wulf was to Ragnar the sea-witch—I implore you to learn the runic charm, and use it if ever danger menaces. Promise me! Promise me, I say!"

Her silvery voice was vibrant with fierce intensity. She caught my right hand and pressed it against her palpitant body, just beneath her proudly swelling left breast.

"Promise!" she reiterated. "I beg your promise! With your right hand on my heart I adjure you to learn the rune."

"No fool like an old fool," I grumbled, adding a trifle maliciously, "particularly when in the hands of a lovely woman. But such a fuss you make over a few words of outlandish gibberish! Read me the rune, then, witch-maid! I'd learn words worse than those can be to please you and set your mind at rest."

With her scarlet lips close to my ear, with bated breath, and in a tone so low I could barely catch her carefully enunciated syllables, she whispered the words. And although her whisper was softer than the sighing of gentlest summer breeze, the tones rang on my inner hearing like strokes of a great war-hammer smiting on a shield of bronze. There was no need to repeat them—either on her part or mine. There was no likelihood of my ever forgetting that runic charm. I could not, even if I would.

"Surely," I muttered, "you are an adept in the ancient magic. Well for me that you love me, else your witcheries might——"

Most amazingly she laughed, a clear, ringing merriment with no trace of the mystic about it.

"Let me show you something—a game, a play; one that will amuse me and entertain you."

She fairly danced across the room and into her own room, emerging with an antique mirror of some burnished, silver-like metal. This she held out to me. I grasped it by its handle obediently enough, humoring this new whim.

"Look into it and say if it is a good mirror," she bade, her sapphire eyes a-dance with elfin mirth.

I looked. All I could see was my same old face, tanned and wrinkled, which I daily saw whenever I shaved or combed my hair, and I told her so. She perched again on the arm of my chair, laid her cheek against mine, and curved her cool arm about my neck.

"Now look again!"

Again the mirror told truth. I saw my face the same as ever, and hers as well, "Like a rose beside a granite boulder," as I assured her.

"You do but see yourself as you think of yourself," she murmured softly, "and me you behold as you believe me to be."

She brought her lips close to the mirror and breathed upon its surface with her warm breath. It clouded over, then cleared. Her voice came, more murmurous than before, but with a definite note of sadness:

"Once more, *look!* Behold yourself as

I see you always; and behold me as I know myself to be! And when I am gone beyond your ken, remember the witch-maid, Heldra, as one woman who loved you so truly that she showed you herself as she actually was!"

The man's face was still my own, but mine as it was in the days of early manhood, ere life's thunders had graven their scars on brow and cheeks and lips, and before the snows of many winters had whitened my hair.

Her features were no less beautiful, but in her reflected eyes I saw ages and ages of life, and bitter experience, and terrible wisdom that was far more wicked than holy; and it came to me with conviction irrefutable that beside this young-appearing girl, maid, or woman, all my years were but as the span of a puling babe compared to the ageless age of an immortal.

"That, at least, is no *glamyr,*" her voice sighed drearily, heavy with the burden of her own knowledge of herself.

I laid my thick, heavy old arm across her smooth satiny white shoulders, and I turned her head until her sapphire eyes met mine fairly. Very gently I kissed her on her brow.

"Heldra Helstrom," I said, and my voice sounded husky with emotion, "you may be all you have just shown me, or worse! You may be Ragnar Wave-Flame herself, the sea-witch who never dies. You may be even what I sometimes suspect, the empress of Hell, come amongst mortals for no good purpose! But be you what you may, old or young, maid or woman, good or evil, witch, spirit, angel or she-devil, such as you are, you are you and I am I, and for some weird reason we seem to love each other in our own way; so let there be an end to what you are or have been, or who I was in other lives, and content ourselves with what *is!*"

Were those bright glitters in her sapphire eyes tear-drops ready to fall? If so, I was not sure, for with a cry like that of a lost soul who has found sanctuary, she buried her face on my shoulder. . . .

After a long silence, she slipped from the arm of my chair, and wordlessly, her face averted, she passed into her room. After an hour or so, I went to my own room—but I could not sleep. . . .

TIME passed, and I dwelt in a "fool's paradise," dreaming that it would last for ever.

The summer colony began to arrive. There were cottages all along the shore, but there were likewise big estates, whose owners were rated as "somebodies," to put it mildly.

A governor of a great and sovereign state; an ex-president of our nation; several foreign diplomats and some of their legation attachés—but why enumerate, when one man only concerns this narrative?

Michael Commnenus, tall, slight, dapper, inclined to swarthiness, with black eyes under crescent-curved black eyebrows; with supercilious smiling lips, a trifle too red for a man; with suave Old World manners, and a most amazingly conceited opinion of himself as a "Lady-charmer."

It was not his first summer in our midst; and although when he was in Washington at his legation I never gave him a thought, when I saw his too handsome face on the beach, I felt a trifle sick! I *knew,* positively, that the minute he set eyes on Heldra. . . . Of course I knew, too, that my witch-niece could take care of herself; but just the same, I sensed annoyance, and perhaps, tragedy.

Well, I was in nowise mistaken.

Heldra and I were just about to shove off in my dory for a sail. It was her chief delight, and mine too, for that matter.

Casually, along strolled Michael Commnenus, twirling a slender stick, caressing a slender black thread he styled a mustache, smiling his approbation of himself. I'd seen that variety of casual approach before. As our flippant young moderns say: It was "old stuff."

Out of the corner of my eye I watched. The Don Juan smirk faded when his calculating, appraising eyes met her sapphire orbs, now shining like the never-melting polar ice. An expression of bewilderment spread over his features. His swarthy skin went a sickly greenish-bronze. Involuntarily he crossed himself and passed on. The man was *afraid,* actually fear-struck!

"Ever see him before, Heldra?" I queried. "He looked at you as if the devil would be a pleasanter sight. That's one man who failed to fall for your vivid beauty, you sea-witch!"

"Who is he?" she asked in a peculiar tone. "I liked his looks even less than he liked mine."

"Michael Commnenus," I informed her, and was about to give her his pedigree as we local people knew him, but was interrupted by her violently explosive:

"Who?"

"Michael Commnenus," I stated again, a trifle testily. "And you needn't shout! What's he done——" but again she interrupted, speaking her archaic Norsk:

"Ho! Varang Chiefs of the Guard Imperial! Thorfinn! Arvid! Sven! And ye who followed them—Gudrun! Randvar! Haakon! Smid! And all ye Varangs in Valhalla, give ear! And ye, O fiends, witches, warlocks, trolls, vampyrs, and all the dark gods who dwell in Hel's halls where the eternal frozen fires blaze without heat, give ear to my voice, and cherish my words, for I give ye all joyous tidings.

"He lives! After all these long centuries Michael Commnenus dwells again on the bosom of fair Earth! In a body of flesh and blood and bone, of nerve and tissue and muscle he lives! He lives, I say! And *I* have found him!

"Oh, now I know why the Norns who rule all fate sent me to this place. And I shall not fail ye, heroes! Content ye, one and all, *I shall not fail!"*

Was this the gorgeous beauty I'd learned to love for her gentleness? Hers was the face of a furious female demon for a moment; but then her normal expression returned and she sighed heavily.

"Heed me not, Uncle John," she said drearily. "I did but recall an ancient tale of foul treachery perpetrated on sundry Norsemen in the Varangian Guard of a Byzantine emperor ages agone.

"The *niddering*—worse than 'coward' —who wrought the bane of some thirty-odd vikings, was a Commnenus, nephew to the Emperor Alexander Commnenus. . . . I live too much in memories of the past, I fear, and for the moment somewhat forgot myself in the hate all good Norse maids should hold toward any who bear the accursed name of the Commneni.

"Still, even as I *know* you to be old Jarl Wulf Red-Brand returned to this world through the gateway of birth—it would be nothing surprizing if this spawn of the Commneni were in truth that same Michael Commnenus of whom the tale is told."

"The belief in reincarnation is age-old," I said reflectively. "And in several parts of the world it is a fundamental tenet of religion. If there be truth in the idea, there is, as you say, nothing surprizing if anybody now living should have been anybody else in some former life. . . . And that sample of the Commneni appears quite capable of any treachery that might serve a purpose at the moment! But, Heldra," I implored her,

struck by a sudden intuition, "I beg of you not to indulge in any of your devilries, witcheries, or Norse magic. If this Michael is that other Michael, yet that was long ago; and if he has not already atoned for his sin, you may be very sure that somewhere, sometime, somehow he will atone; so do not worry your regal head about him."

"Spoken like a right Saga-man," she smiled as I finished my brief homily. "I thank you for your words of wisdom. And now, Jarl Wulf Red-Brand, I know you to be fey as well as I am. 'Surely he will atone for his sin' . . . oh! a most comforting thought! So let us think no more about the matter."

I glanced sharply at her. Her too instant acquiescence was suspicious. But her sapphire eyes met mine fairly, smilingly, sending as always a warm glow of contentment through me. So I accepted her assurance as it sounded, and gave myself up to the enjoyment of the sail and the sound of her silvery voice as she sang an old English love ballad I'd known as a young man. And under the spell of her magnetic personality gradually the episode of Michael Commnenus faded into nothingness—for a while.

A COUPLE of days later, just about dark, Heldra came down the stairs from the attic, where she'd been rummaging. In her hand she carried an old violin-case. I looked and grinned ruefully.

"You are a bad old Uncle John," she scolded. "Why did you not tell me you played the '*fidel*,' even as Jarl Wulf played one in his time? Think of all the sweet music you might have made in the past winter nights, and think of the dances I might have danced for your delight while you played—even as Ragnar danced for her old Jarl."

"But I did not tell you that I played a fiddle—because I don't," I stated flatly. "That is a memento of an absurd ambition I once cherished, but which died a-borning. I tried to learn the thing, but the noises I extracted were so abominable that I quit before I'd fairly got started."

"You are teasing," she retorted, her eyes sparkling with mischief. "But I am not to be put off thus easily. Tonight you will play, and I will dance—such a dance as you have never beheld even when you were Jarl Wulf."

"If I try to play that thing," I assured her seriously, "you'll have a time dancing to my discords, you gorgeous tease!"

"We'll see," she nodded. "But even as my magic revealed to me the whereabouts of the '*fidel*,' so my spirit tells me that you play splendidly."

"Your 'magic' may be all right, but your 'spirit' has certainly misinformed you," I growled.

"My spirit has never yet lied to me—nor has it done so this time." Her tone was grave, yet therein was a lurking mockery; and I became a trifle provoked.

"All right," I assented grouchily. "Whenever you feel like hearing me '*play*,' I'll do it. And you'll never want to listen to such noises again."

She went into her room laughing sweetly, and took the fiddle with her.

After supper she said nothing about me playing that old fiddle, and I fatuously thought she'd let the matter drop. But about ten o'clock she went to her room without a word. She emerged after a bit, wearing naught but a sheer loose palest blue silk robe, held at the waist only by a tiny jeweled gold filigree clasp. Loose as the robe was, it clung lovingly to her every curve as if caressing the beauteous, statuesque body it could not and would not conceal.

She was totally devoid of all ornament save that tiny brooch, and her wondrous fiery-gold hair was wholly unconfined,

falling below her waist in a cascade of shimmering sunset hues, against which her rose-pearl body gleamed through the filmy gossamer-like robe.

Again she sat and talked for a while. But along toward midnight she broke a short silence with:

"I'll be back in a minute. I wish to prepare for my dancing."

From her room she brought four antique bronze lamps and a strangely shaped urn of oil. She filled the lamps and placed one at each corner of the living-room, on the floor.

Back into her room she went, and out again with an octagonal-shaped stone, flat on both sides, about an inch thick, and some four inches across. This she placed on the low taboret whereon I usually kept my *nargilyeh*. She propped up that slab of stone as if placing a mirror—which I decided it couldn't very well be, as it did not even reflect light but seemed as dull as a slab of slate.

As a final touch, she brought out that confounded old fiddle! And on her scarlet lips was a smile that a seraph might have envied, so innocent and devoid of guile it seemed.

"What's this?" I demanded—as if I didn't know!

"Your little '*fidel*' with which you will make for your Heldra such rapturous music," she smiled caressingly.

"Um-m-m-m!" I grunted. "And what are those lamps for—and that ugly slab of black rock?"

"That black slab is a 'Hel-stone,' having the property of reflecting whatever is directly before it, if illumined by those four lamps placed at certain angles; and later it will give off those same reflections—even as the stuff called luminous calcium sulfide absorbs light-rays until surcharged, and then emits them, when properly exposed. So, you see, we can preserve the picture of my dance."

"Heldra," I demanded sharply, "are you up to some devilishness? All this looks amazingly like the stage-setting for witch-working!"

"I have sung for you, on different nights," she replied in gentlest reproach, "and have told old tales, and have attired myself again and again for your pleasure in beholding me. Have all these things ever bewitched you, or harmed anyone? How, then, can the fact of my dancing for my own satisfaction, before the mystic Hel-stone, do any harm?"

As ever, she won. Her sapphire orbs did queer things to me whenever they looked into my own gray, faded old eyes—trusting me to understand and approve whatever she did, simply because she was she and I was I.

"All right," I said. "But you're making a fool of me—insisting that I play this old fiddle. Well—I'll teach you a lesson!" And I drew the bow over the strings with a most appalling wail.

And with the unexpected swiftness of a steel trap closing on its victim, icy fingers locked about my wrist, and I knew very definitely that another and alien personality was guiding my arm and fingers! But there came likewise a swift certitude that if I behaved, no harm would ensue—to me, at least. So I let the *thing* have its way—and listened to such music as I had not believed could be played on any instrument devised by a mortal.

I wish that I could describe that music, but I do not know the right words. I doubt if they have been invented. It was wild, barbaric, savage, but likewise it was alluring, seductive, stealing away all inhibitions—too much of it would have corrupted the angels in heaven. I was almost in a stupor, intoxicated, like a *hasheesh*-eater in a drugged dream, spell-

bound, unable to break from the thralldom holding my will, drowning in rapture well-nigh unbearable.

Heldra suddenly blew out the big kerosene lamp standing on the table, leaving as sole illumination the rays from those four bronze lights standing in the corners.

Her superb body moved gracefully, slowly at first, then faster, into the intricate figure and pattern of a dance that was old when the world was young. . . .

With inward horror I knew the why and wherefore of that entire ceremonial; knew I'd been be-cozened and be-japed; yet knew, likewise, that it was too late for interference. I could not even speak. I could but watch, while some personality alien to my body played maddeningly on my fiddle, and the 'niece' I loved danced a dance deliberately planned to seduce a man who hated and feared the dancer—and for what devilish purpose I could well guess!

I saw the light-rays converge on her alluring, statuesque body, saw them apparently pass through her and impinge on the surface of that black, sullen, octagonal Hel-stone, and be greedily swallowed up, until the dull, black surface glowed like a rare black Australian opal; and ever the dancing of the witch-girl grew more alluring, more seductive, more abandoned. And I knew why Heldra was thus shamefully—shamelessly, rather—conducting! She had read Michael Commnenus his character very accurately; knew that his *soul* had recognized her hatred for him, and *feared* her—and that her one chance to get him in her clutches lay in inflaming his senses . . . and she'd even told me the properties of that most damnable Hel-stone!

Wilder and faster came the music, and swifter and still more alluring grew the rhythmic response as Heldra's lovely body swayed and spun and swooped and postured; until ultimately her waving arms brought her fluttering hands, in the briefest of touches, into contact with the tiny brooch at her waist and the filmy robe was swept away in a single gesture that was faithfully recorded on the sullen surface of the Hel-stone.

Instantly the dancer stopped as if petrified, her arms outstretched as in invitation, her regal head thrown back, showing the long smooth white column of her throat, her clear, half-closed, sapphire-blue eyes agleam with subtle challenge. . . .

The uncanny music died in a single sighing, sobbing whisper, poison-sweet . . . the clutching, icy fingers were gone from my wrist . . . my first coherent thought was: Had that spell been directed at me, the old adage anent "old fools" would have been swiftly justified!

And I knew that to all intents and purposes, Michael Commnenus was sunk!

Just the same, I was furious. Heldra had gone too far, and I told her so, flatly. I pointed out in terms unmistakable that what she planned was murder, or worse; and that this was modern America wherein witchcraft had neither place nor sanction, and that I'd be no accessory to any such devilishness as she was contriving. Oh, I made myself and my meaning plain.

And she stood and looked at me with a most injured expression. She made me feel as if I'd wantonly struck a child across the face in the midst of its innocent diversions!

"I don't actually care if the devil flies off with Michael Commnenus," I concluded wrathfully, "but I won't have him murdered by you while you're living here, posing as my niece! No doubt it's quite possible for you to evade any legal consequences by disappearing, but what of me? As accessory, I'd be liable to life imprisonment, at the least!"

Her face lightened as by magic, and her voice was genuinely regretful, and in her eyes was a light of sincere love. She came to me and wrapped her white arms about my neck, murmuring terms of affectionate consolation.

"Poor dear Uncle John! Heldra was thoughtless—wicked me! And I might have involved you in serious trouble? I am ashamed! But the fate laid upon me by the Norns is heavy, and I may not evade it, even for you, whom I love. Tell me," she demanded suddenly, "if I should destroy the vile earthworm without any suspicion attaching to you, or to me, would you love me as before, even knowing what I had done?"

"No!" I fairly snarled the denial. I wanted it to be emphatic.

She smiled serenely, and kissed me full on my lips.

"I never thought to thank a mortal for lying to me, but now I do! Deep in your heart I can read your true feeling, and I am glad! But now"—and her tone took on a sadness most desolate—"I regret to say that on the morrow I leave you. The lovely garments you gave me, and the trunks containing them, I take with me, as you would not wish that I go empty-handed. Nor will I insult you, O Jarl Wulf, by talk of payment.

"When I am gone, you will just casually mention that I have returned to my home, and the local gossips will not suspect aught untoward. And soon I shall be forgotten, and no one will suspect, or possibly connect you, or me, with what inevitably must happen to that spawn of the Commneni.

"But of this be very sure: Somewhere, sometime, you and I shall be together again. . . ." Her voice broke, she kissed me fiercely on the lips, then tenderly on both cheeks, then lastly, with a queer reverence, on my furrowed old brow. Then she turned, went straight to her room, shut the door, and I heard the click of the key as she locked herself in, for the first time during her stay in my house. . . .

Next morning, as she'd planned, she departed on the first train cityward. I'd given her money enough for all her requirements—more, indeed, than she was willing to take at first, declaring that she intended selling some few of her jewels.

And with her departure went all which made life worth living. . . .

HEAVILY I dragged my reluctant feet back to the empty shell of a cottage which until then had been an earthly paradise to an old man—and the very first thing I laid eyes on was that accursed Hel-stone, lying on the living-room table.

I picked it up, half minded to shatter it to fragments, but an idea seized me. I bore it down-cellar, where semi-darkness prevailed, and the Hel-stone glowed softly with its witch-light, showing me the loveliness of her who had departed from me. And I pressed the cold octagon to my lips, thankful that she'd left me the thing as a feeble substitute for her presence. Then I turned and went back upstairs, found an old ivory box of Chinese workmanship, and placed the Hel-stone therein, very carefully, as a thing priceless.

I went to bed early that night. There was no reason to sit up. But I could not sleep. I lay there in my bed, cursing the entire line of Commneni, root, trunk and branch, from the first of that ilk whom history records to this latest scion, or "spawn," as Heldra had termed him.

Around midnight, being still wakeful, I arose, got the Hel-stone and sat in the darkness—and gradually became aware that I was not alone! Looking up, I saw her I'd lost standing in a witch-glow of phosphorescent light. I knew at once that it was not Heldra in person, but

her *"scin-lacca"* or "shining double," a "sending," and that it was another of her witcheries.

"But even this is welcome," I thought. Then I felt *her* thought expressed through that phantasmal semblance of her own gorgeous self—and promptly strove, angrily, to resist her command. Much good it did me!

Utterly helpless, yet fully cognizant of my actions, but oddly assured that about me was a cloak of invisibility—the *"glamyr"* of the ancient *Alrunas*—I dresssed, took the Hel-stone, and passed out into the night.

Straight to the cottage of Commnenus I went, pawed about under the door-step, and planted there the Hel-stone; then, still secure in the mystic glamor, I returned to my own abode.

And no sooner had I seated myself in my chair for a smoke, than I realized fully the utter devilishness of that witch from out the wintry seas whom I had taken into my home and had sponsored as my "niece" in the eyes of the world.

Right then I decided to go back and get that Hel-stone, and smash it—and couldn't do it! I got sleepy so suddenly that I awoke to find that it was broad daylight, and nine-thirty a. m. And from then on, as regularly as twilight came, I could only stay awake so long as I kept my thoughts away from that accursed Hel-stone; wherefore I determined that the thing could stay where it was until it rotted, for all me!

Then Commnenus came along the beach late one afternoon. He raised his hat in his Old World, courtly fashion, and tried to make some small talk. I grunted churlishly and ignored him. But finally he came out bluntly with:

"Professor Craig, I know your opinion of me, and admit it is to some extent justifiable. I seem to have acquired the reputation of being a Don Juan. But I ask you to believe that I bitterly regret that—now! Yet, despite that reputation, I'd like to ask you a most natural question, if I may."

I nodded assent, unprepared for what was coming, yet somehow assured it would concern Heldra. Nor was I at all disappointed, for he fairly blurted out:

"When do you expect Miss Helstrom to return, if at all?"

I was flabbergasted! That is the only word adequate. I glared at him in a black fury. When I could catch my breath I demanded:

"How did even *you* summon up the infernal gall to ask *me* that?"

His reply finished flattening me out.

"Because I love her! Wait"—he begged—"and hear me out, please! Even a criminal is allowed that courtesy." Then as I nodded grudgingly, he resumed:

"The first time I saw her, something deep within me shrank away from her with repulsion. Still, I admired her matchless beauty. But of late, since her departure, there is not a night I do not see her in my mind's eye, and I know that I love her, and hope that she will return; hence my query.

"I will be frank—I even hope that she noticed me and read my admiration without dislike. Perhaps two minds can reach each other—sometimes. For invariably I see her with head thrown back, her eyes half closed, and her arms held out as if calling me to come to her. And if I knew her whereabouts I'd most certainly go, nor would I be 'trifling,' where she is concerned. I want to win her, if possible, as my wife; and an emperor should be proud to call *her* that——"

"Very romantic," I sneered. "But, Mr. Woman-Chaser, I cut my eye-teeth a long while before you were born, and I'm not so easily taken in. The whereabouts of my niece are no concern of yours. So get away from me before I lose my

temper, or I'll not be answerable for my actions. *Get!*"

He went! The expression of my face and the rage in my eyes must have warned him that I was in a killing humor. Well, I was. But likewise, I was sick with fear. What he'd just told me was sufficient to sicken me—the Hel-stone had gotten in its damnable work. My very soul was aghast as it envisioned the inevitable consequences. . . .

AN IDEA obsessed me, and I needed the shades of night to cloak my purpose.

Aimlessly I wandered from room to room in my cottage, and finally drifted into the room which had been Heldra's. Still aimlessly I pulled open drawer after drawer in the dresser, and in the lowest one I heard a faint metallic *clink*.

The four antique bronze lamps were there. I shrewdly suspected she had left them there as means of establishing contact with her, should need arise. I examined them, and found, as I'd hoped, that they were filled.

Around ten o'clock I placed those lamps in the four corners of the living-room, and lighted them, precisely as I'd seen Heldra do. Then I tried my talents at making an invocation.

"*Heldra! Heldra! Heldra!*" I called. "I, John Craig, who gave you shelter at your need, call to you now, wheresoever you be, to come to me at my need!"

The four lights went out, yet not a breath of air stirred in the room. A faintly luminous glow, the witch-light, ensued; and there she stood, or rather, the *scin-læcca,* her shining double! But I knew that anything I might say to it would be the same as if she were there in the flesh.

"Heldra," I beseeched that witch-lighted simulacrum, "by the love you gave me, as Ragnar loved Jarl Wulf Red-Sword, I ask that you again enshroud me with the mantle of invisibility, the '*glamyr,*' and allow me to lift that accursed Hel-stone from where you compelled me to conceal it. Let me return it to you, at any place you may appoint, so that it can do no more harm.

"Already that poor bewitched fool is madly in love with you, because the radiations of that enchanted stone have saturated him every time he put foot on the door-step beneath which I buried it!

"Heldra, grant me this one kindness, and I will condone all sins you ever did in all your witch-life."

The shining wraith nodded slowly, unmistakably assenting to my request. As from a far distance I heard a faint whisper:

"Since it is your desire, get the Hel-stone, and bear it yourself to the sea-cave at the foot of the great cliff guarding the north passage into the harbor. Once you have borne it there, its work, and yours, are done.

"And I thank you for saying that you will condone all I have ever done, for the burden of the past is heavy, and your words have made it easier to bear."

The shining wraith vanished, and I went forth into the darkness. Straight to the house where I'd hidden the Hel-stone I betook myself, felt under the step, found what I sought, took it with an inward prayer of gratitude that because of Heldra's "*glamyr*" I had not been caught at something questionable in appearance, and started up the beach.

The tide was nearly out; so I walked rapidly, as I had some distance to go, and the sea-cave Heldra had designated could not be entered at high tide, although once within, one was safe enough and could leave when the entrance was once more exposed.

I entered the cave believing that I'd promptly be rid of the entire mess, once

and for all. But there was no one there, and the interior of the cave was as dark as Erebus. I lit a match, and saw nothing. The match burned out. I fumbled for another—a dazzling ray from a flashlight blinded me for a moment, then left my face and swept the cave. A hated voice, suave yet menacing, said:

"Well, Professor Craig, you may now hand me whatever it was that you purloined from under my door-step!"

An extremely business-like automatic pistol was aimed in the exact direction of my solar plexus—and the speaker was none other than Michael Commnenus!

Very evidently the mystic *"glamyr"* had failed to work that time. And I was in a rather nasty predicament.

Then, abruptly, Heldra came! She looked like an avenging fury, emerging out of nowhere, apparently, and the tables were turned. She wore a dark cloak or long mantle draped over her head and falling to her feet.

Her right hand was outstretched, and with her left hand she seized the Hel-stone from my grasp. She pointed one finger at Commnenus, and did not even touch him; yet had she smote with an ancient war-hammer the effect would have been the same.

"You dog, and son of a long line of dogs!" her icy voice rang with excoriating virulence. "Drop that silly pistol! *Drop it, I say!"*

A faint blue flicker snapped from her extended finger—the pistol fell from a flaccid hand. Commnenus seemed totally paralyzed. Heldra's magic held him completely in thralldom. . . . I snapped into activity and scooped up the gun.

"Followed me, did you?" I snarled. "I'll——"

"Wait, Jarl Wulf!" Heldra's tone was frankly amused. "No need for you to do aught! Mine is the blood-feud, mine the blood-right! And ere I finish with yon Michael Commnenus, an ancient hate will be surfeited, and an ancient vengeance, too long delayed, will be consummated."

"Heldra," I began, for dread seized me at the ominous quality of her words, "I will not stand for this affair going any farther! I——"

"Be silent! Seat yourself over there against the wall and watch and hear, but move not nor speak again, lest I silence you for ever!"

A force irresistible hurled me across the cave and set me down, hard, on a flat rock. I realized fully that I was obeying her mandate—I couldn't speak, couldn't even move my eyelids, so thoroughly had she inhibited any further interference on my part.

PAYING no further attention to Commnenus for the moment, she crossed over to me, bent and kissed me on my lips, her sapphire eyes laughing into my own blazing, wrathful eyes.

"Poor dear! It is too bad, but you made me do it. I wanted you to help me all the way through this tangled coil—but you have been *so* difficult to manage! Yet in some ways you have played into my hands splendidly. Yes, even to bringing the Hel-stone back to me—and I would not care to lose that for a king's ransom. And *I* put it into yon fool's head to be wakeful tonight, and see you regain the Hel-stone, and follow you—and thus walk into my nice little trap.

"And now!"

She whirled and faced Commnenus. And for all that he was spellbound, in his eyes I read fear and a ghastly foreknowledge of some dreadful fate about to be meted out to him at her hands.

She picked up the flashlight he had dropped and extinguished it with the dry comment:

"We need a different light here—the

Hel-light from Hela's halls!" And at her word, a most peculiar light pervaded the cave, and there was that about its luminance that actually affrighted. Again she spoke:

"Michael Commnenus, you utterly vile worm of the earth! You know that your doom is upon you—but as yet you know not why. O beast lower than the swine! Harken and remember my words even after eternity is swallowed up in the Twilight of the Gods! You are a modern, and know not that the self, the soul, is eternal, undying, changing its body and name in every clime and period, yet ever the same soul, responsible for the deeds of its bodies. You have even prated of *your* soul—when in fact, *you* are the property of the soul!

"Watch, now!" She pointed to the cave entrance. "Behold there the wisps of sea-fog gathering; and gradually will come the rising tide. And on the curtain of that cold, swirling mist, behold the pictures of the past—a past centuries old; a past wherein your craven, treacherous soul sinned beyond all pardon!

"Look you, too, Jarl Wulf Red-Brand, so that in all the days remaining to you upon Earth, you may know that his doom was just, and that Heldra is but executing a merited penalty!

"And while the shuttles of the *Norns* weave the tapestry of the sin of this Commnenus, I will tell all the tale of his crimes.

"In Byzantium reigned the emperor, Alexander Commnenus. Secure his throne, guarded by the ponderous axes and the long swords of the Varangians, the splendid sons of the Norse-lands, who had gone a-viking. Trusted and loved were the Varangs by the emperor, and oft he boasted of their fidelity, swearing on the cross of Constantine that to the last man would his Varangs perish ere one would flinch a step from overwhelming foes, citing in proof their battle-cry:

" 'Valhalla! Valhalla! Victory or Valhalla!'

"Into the harbor of the Golden Horn sailed the viking long-ship, the *Grettir*. Three noble brothers owned her—Thorfinn, Arvid, Sven. With them sailed their sister . . . her fame as an *Alruna-maid*, prophetess and priestess, was sung throughout the Norse-lands. No man so low but bore her reverence. Sin it was to cast eyes of desire on any *Alruna*, and the sister of the three brothers was held especially holy.

"Between the hands of the Emperor Alexander Commnenus, the three brethren placed their hands, swearing fealty for a year and a day. Thirty fighting-men, their crew, followed wherever the three brothers led. And the great emperor, hearing of their war-fame from others of the Varangian guard, gave the brothers high place in his esteem, and held them nigh his own person.

"Their sister, the *Alruna-maid*, was treated as became her rank and holy repute. Aye! Even in Christian Byzantium respect and honor were shown her by the priests of an alien belief. But one man in Byzantium aspired more greatly than any other, Norseman or Byzantine, had ever dared.

"A Commnenus he, grand admiral of Byzantium's war fleet, nephew to the emperor, enjoying to the full the confidence and love of his imperial uncle. Notorious for his profligacy, he cast his libertine eyes on the Norse *Alruna-maid*, but with no thought of making her his wife. Nay! 'Twas only as his leman he desired her. . . . So, he plotted. . . .

"The three brothers, Thorfinn, Arvid, Sven, with their full crew, in the long-ship *Grettir* were ordered to sea to cruise against certain pirates harrying a portion of the emperor's coasts.

"Every man of the *Grettir's* crew died the deaths of rats—poison in the water-casks! . . . They died as no Norseman should die, brutes' deaths, unfit for Valhalla and the company of heroes who had passed in battle! And their splendid bodies, warped and distorted by pangs of the poison, were cast overside as prey for sharks, by two creatures of this grand admiral, whom he had sent with the three brothers as pilots knowing the coast. They placed the drug in the casks, they flung over the dead and dying, they ran the *Grettir* aground and set fire to her—but *his* was the command—*and his the crime!*"

And as Heldra told the tale, in a voice whose dreary tones made the recital seem even worse—the watching Commnenus and I saw clearly depicted on the curtain of the mist, each separate incident. . . . Heldra turned to the wildly glaring Michael.

"There was but one person in all Byzantium who knew the truth," she screamed in sudden frenzy. "I give back for a moment your power of speech. *Say, O fool! Coward! Niddering! Who am I?*"

Abruptly she tore off the somber cloak and stood in all her loveliness, enhanced by every ornament she once had worn for my pleasure in beholding her thus arrayed.

A CRY of unearthly terror broke from the staring Commnenus. His voice was a strangled croak as he gasped:

"The *Alruna-maid*, Heldra! The red-haired sea-witch—sister to the three brothers, Thorfinn, Arvid, Sven!"

"Aye, you foul dog! And me you took at night, after they sailed away, and me you shut up where my cries for aid could not be heard; and me you would have despoiled—me, the *Alruna-maid*, sworn to chastity! Me you jeered at and reviled, boasting of your recent crimes against all that the Norse-folk hold most sacred!

"Yet I escaped from that last dreadful dungeon wherein you immured me—*how?*

"By that magic known to such as I, I called upon the empress of the Underworld, Hela herself, and pledged her my service in return for indefinitely continued life, until I could repay you and avenge the heroes denied the joys of Valhalla—by you!

"And now—comes swiftly the doom I have planned for you . . . you who now *remember!*"

Heldra spoke truly. Swiftly it came! Sitting where I was, I saw it plainly, a great dragon-ship with round shields displayed along her gunwales, with a big square sail of crimson embroidered in gold, with long oars dipping and lifting in unison—in faint ghostly tones I could hear the deep-sea rowers chanting, *"Juch! Hey! Sa-sa-sa! Hey-sa, Hey-sa, Hey-sa, Hey-sa!"* and knew it for the time-beat rowing-song of the ancient vikings!

The whole picture was limned in the cold sea-fires from whence that terrible viking ghost-ship had risen with its crew of long-dead Norsemen who were not dead—the men too good for *Hel*, and denied Valhalla. . . .

Straight to the mouth of the cave came the ghost-ship, and its crew disembarked and entered. Heldra cried out in joyous welcome:

"Even from out of the deeps, ye heroes, one and all, have ye heard my silent summons, and obeyed the voice of your Alruna from old time! Now your waiting is at an end!

"Yonder stands the Commnenus. That other concerns ye not—but mark him well, for in a former life he was Jarl Wulf Red-Brand! See, on his left hand is still the old silver ring with its runes of Ragnar Wave-Flame!"

The ghost-vikings turned their dead

eyes on me with a curious fixity. One and all, they saluted. Evidently, Jarl Wulf must have been somebody, in his time. Then ignoring me, they turned to Heldra, awaiting her further commands. Commnenus they looked at, fiercely, avidly.

Heldra's voice came, heavily, solemnly, with a curious bell-like tone sounding the knell of doom incarnate:

"Michael Commnenus! This your present body has never wrought me harm, nor has it harmed any of these. It is not with your body that we hold our feud. Wherefore, your body shall go forth from this cave as it entered—as handsome as ever, bearing no mark of scathe.

"But your niddering soul, O most accursed, shall be drawn from out its earthly tenement this night and given over to these souls you wronged, who now await their victim and their vengeance! And I tell you, Michael Commnenus, that what they have in store for you will make the Hades of your religion seem as a devoutly-to-be-desired paradise!"

Heldra stepped directly before Commnenus. Her shapely white arms were outstretched, palms down, fingers stiffly extended. A queer, violet-tinged radiance streamed from her fingers, gradually enveloping Commnenus—he began to *glow*, as if he had been immersed and had absorbed all his body could take up. . . .

Heldra's voice took on the tone of finality:

"Michael Commnenus! Thou accursed soul, by the power I hold, given me by Hela's self, I call you forth from your hiding-place of flesh—*come ye out!*"

The living body never moved, but from out its mouth emerged a faint silvery-tinted vapor flowing toward the *Alruna-maid*, and as it came, the violet glow diminished. The accumulating silvery mist swirled and writhed, perceptibly taking on the semblance of the body from whence it was being extracted. There remained finally but a merest thread of silvery shimmer connecting soul and body. Heldra spoke beneath her breath:

"One of you hew that cord asunder!"

A double-bladed Norse battle-ax whirled and a ghostly voice croaked: *"Thor Hulf!"*

Thor, the old Norse war-god, must have helped, for the great ghost-ax evidently encountered a solid cable well-nigh as strong as tempered steel. Thrice the ax rose and fell, driven by the swelling thews of the towering giant wielding it, ere the silver cord was broken by the blade.

A tittering giggle burst from the lips of the present-day Michael Commnenus.

I realized with a sudden sickness at the pit of my stomach that an utterly mindless imbecile stood there, grinning vacuously!

"That *Thing*," Heldra said, coldly scornful as she pointed to the silvery shining soul, "is yours, heroes! Do with it as ye will!"

Two of the gigantic wraiths clamped their great hands on its shoulders. It turned a dull leaden-gray, the color of abject fear. Cringing and squirming, it was hustled aboard the ghostly dragon-ship. The other ghost-vikings went aboard, taking their places at the oars . . . yet they waited. Heldra turned to me.

"Be free of the spell I laid upon you!" Her tone was as gentle as it had been in her sweetest moments while she dwelt in my home as my niece.

I GASPED, rose and stretched. I wanted to be angry—and dared not. I'd seen too much of her hellish powers to risk incurring her displeasure. And reading my mind, she laughed merrily.

Then her cool, soft, white arms went about my neck, her wondrous sapphire eyes looked long and tenderly into mine —and I will not write the message I read in those softly shining orbs. Once again her silvery voice spoke:

"Jarl Wulf Red-Brand! John Craig! I am the grand-daughter of Ragnar Wave-Flame! And once I went a-viking with my three brothers, to far Byzantium. You know that tale. Now, once I said that Ragnar Wave-Flame never died. Also, I said that I had dived into her sea-cave and lain in her arms—and now I tell you the rest of that mystery: with her breath she entered this my body where ever since we have dwelt as one soul. I needed aid in seeking my vengeance, for it was after I'd escaped the clutches of the Commnenus, and had passed through adventures incredible while making my way back to the Norse-lands—and my spirit was very bitter. And when I sought her council, Ragnar helped me. . . .

"This now do I ask of you: Do you, as I have sometimes thought, love me as a man loves a maid? Reflect well, ere you answer, and recall what I once showed you in a mirror—I am older than you! So, knowing that, despite my witcheries of the long, bitter past, and those of tonight, would you take me, were you and I young once more?"

"By all the gods in Valhalla, and by all the devils in Hela's halls: *yes!*" My reply was given without need of reflecting, or counting cost.

"Then, in a day to come, you shall take me—I swear it!"

Full upon my mouth she pressed her scarlet lips, and a surging flame suffused my entire body. Yet it was life—not death. Against my chest I felt the pressure of her swelling breasts, and fires undreamable streamed from her heart to mine. Time itself stood still. After an eon or so she unwound her clinging arms from about my neck and turned away, and with never a backward glance she entered that waiting, ghostly dragon-ship. The oars dipped. . . .

"Juch! Hey! Sa-sa-sa! Hey-sa! Hey-sa! Hey-sa! Hey-sa!" and repeated . . . and again . . . until the faint, ghostly chant was swallowed by distance. . . .

I left the cave.

The driveling idiot who had been Michael Commnenus was already gone. Later, the gossip ran that he'd "lost his mind," and that his embassy had returned him to his own land. None ever suspected, or coupled me or my "niece" with his affliction. And he himself had absolutely no memory—had lost even his own name when his soul departed!

But within a month, I sold my cottage, packed and stored all my belongings until I could find a new location, where I'd be totally unknown; and then I went away from where I had dwelt for years—and with urgent reason.

The fire with which Heldra had imbued me from her breath and breast was renewing my youth! My hair was shades darker, my wrinkles almost gone; my step was brisker, I looked to be nearer forty than almost sixty. So marked was the change that the villagers stared openly at what seemed at least a miracle . . . tongues were wagging . . . old superstitions were being revived and dark hints were being bandied about. . . . So I finally decided to leave, and go where my altered appearance would cause no comment.

I wonder if——

"Those eyes shone through the shadows: unwinking, unchanging, omniscient in this little world of the dead."

Fane of the Black Pharaoh

By ROBERT BLOCH

Terrible was the fame of Nephren-Ka, and more terrible still was the destiny that Captain Cartaret read on the walls of the red-litten underground corridors

"LIAR!" said Captain Cartaret.

The dark man did not move, but beneath the shadows of his burnoose a scowl slithered across a contorted countenance. But when he stepped forward into the lamplight, he smiled.

"That is a harsh epithet, *effendi*," purred the dark man.

Captain Cartaret stared at his midnight visitor with quizzical appraisal.

"A deserved one, I think," he observed. "Consider the facts. You come to my door at midnight, uninvited and unknown. You tell me some long rigmarole about secret vaults below Cairo, and then voluntarily offer to lead me there."

"That is correct," assented the Arab, blandly. He met the glance of the scholarly captain calmly.

"Why should you do this?" pursued Cartaret. "If your story is true, and you do possess so manifestly absurd a secret, why should you come to me? Why not claim the glory of discovery yourself?"

"I told you, *effendi,*" said the Arab. "That is against the law of our brotherhood. It is not written that I should do so. And knowing of your interest in these things, I came to offer you the privilege."

"You came to pump me for my information; no doubt that's what you mean," retorted the captain, acidly. "You beggars have some devilishly clever ways of getting underground information, don't you? So far as I know, you're here to find out how much I've already learned, so that you and your fanatic thugs can knife me if I know too much."

"Ah!" The dark stranger suddenly leaned forward and peered into the white man's face. "Then you admit that what I tell you is not wholly strange—you do know something of this place already?"

"Suppose I do," said the captain, unflinching. "That doesn't prove that you're a philanthropic guide to what I'm seeking. More likely you want to pump me, as I said, then dispose of me and get the goods for yourself. No, your story is too thin. Why, you haven't even told me your name."

"My name?" The Arab smiled. "That does not matter. What does matter is your distrust of me. But, since you have admitted at last that you do know about the crypt of Nephren-Ka, perhaps I can show you something that may prove my own knowledge."

He thrust a lean hand under his robe and drew forth a curious object of dull, black metal. This he flung casually on the table, so that it lay in a fan of lamplight.

Captain Cartaret bent forward and peered at the queer, metallic thing. His thin, usually pale face now glowed with unconcealed excitement. He grasped the black object with twitching fingers.

"The Seal of Nephren-Ka!" he whispered. When he raised his eyes to the inscrutable Arab's once more, they shone with mingled incredulity and belief.

"It's true, then—what you say," the captain breathed. "You could obtain this only from the Secret Place; the Place of the Blind Apes where——"

"Nephren-Ka bindeth up the threads of truth." The smiling Arab finished the quotation for him.

"You, too, have read the *Necronomicon,* then." Cartaret looked stunned. "But there are only six complete versions, and I thought the nearest was in the British Museum."

The Arab's smile broadened. "My fellow-countryman, Alhazred, left many legacies among his own people," he said, softly. "There is wisdom available to all who know where to seek it."

For a moment there was silence in the room. Cartaret gazed at the black Seal, and the Arab scrutinized him in turn. The thoughts of both were far away. At last the thin, elderly white man looked up with a quick grimace of determination.

"I believe your story," he said. "Lead me."

The Arab, with a satisfied shrug, took a chair, unbidden, at the side of his host. From that moment he assumed complete psychic mastery of the situation.

"First, you must tell me what you know," he commanded. "Then I shall reveal the rest."

Cartaret, unconscious of the other's dominance, complied. He told the stranger his story in an abstracted manner, while his eyes never swerved from the cryptic black amulet on the table. It was almost as though he were hypnotized by the queer talisman. The Arab said nothing, though there was a gay gloating in his fanatical eyes.

2

CARTARET spoke of his youth; of his wartime service in Egypt and subsequent station in Mesopotamia. It was here that the captain had first become interested in archeology and the shadowy realms of the occult which surround it. From the vast desert of Arabia had come intriguing tales as old as time; furtive fables of mystic Irem, city of ancient dread, and the lost legends of vanished empires. He had spoken to the dreaming dervishes whose hashish visions revealed secrets of forgotten days, and had explored certain reputedly ghoul-ridden tombs and burrows in the ruins of an older Damascus than recorded history knows.

In time, his retirement had brought him to Egypt. Here in Cairo there was access to still more secret lore. Egypt, land of lurid curses and lost kings, has ever harbored mad myths in its age-old shadows. Cartaret had learned of priests and pharaohs; of olden oracles, forgotten sphinxes, fabulous pyramids, titanic tombs. Civilization was but a cobweb surface upon the sleeping face of Eternal Mystery. Here, beneath the inscrutable shadows of the pyramids, the old gods still stalked in the old ways. The ghosts of Set, Ra, Osiris, and Bubastis lurked in desert ways; Horus, Isis, and Sebek yet dwelt in the ruins of Thebes and Memphis, or bided in the crumbling tombs below the Valley of Kings.

Nowhere had the past survived as it did in ageless Egypt. With every mummy, the Egyptologists uncovered a curse; the solving of each ancient secret merely uncovered a deeper, more perplexing riddle. Who built the pylons of the temples? Why did the old kings rear the pyramids? How did they work such marvels? Were their curses potent still? Where vanished the priests of Egypt?

These and a thousand other unanswered questions intrigued the mind of Captain Cartaret. In his new-found leisure he read and studied, talked with scientists and savants. Ever the quest of primal knowledge beckoned him on to blacker brinks; he could slake his thirsty soul only in stranger secrets, more dangerous discoveries.

Many of the reputable authorities he knew were open in their confessed opinion that it was not well for meddlers to pry too deeply beneath the surface. Curses had come true with puzzling promptness, and warning prophecies had been fulfilled with a vengeance. It was not good to profane the shrines of the old dark gods who still dwelt within the land.

But the terrible lure of the forgotten and the forbidden was a pulsing virus in Cartaret's blood. When he heard the legend of Nephren-Ka, he naturally investigated.

Nephren-Ka, according to authoritative knowledge, was merely a mythical figure. He was purported to have been a Pharaoh of no known dynasty, a priestly usurper of the throne. The most common fables placed his reign in almost biblical times. He was said to have been the last and greatest of that Egyptian cult of priest-sorcerers who for a time transformed the recognized religion into a dark and terrible thing. This cult, led

by the arch-hierophants of Bubastis, Anubis, and Sebek, viewed their gods as the representatives of actual Hidden Beings —montsrous beast-men who shambled on Earth in primal days. They accorded worship to the Elder One who is known to myth as Nyarlathotep, the "Mighty Messenger." This abominable deity was said to confer wizard's power upon receiving human sacrifices; and while the evil priests reigned supreme they temporarily transformed the religion of Egypt into a bloody shambles. With anthropomancy and necrophilism they sought terrible boons from their demons.

The tale goes that Nephren-Ka, on the throne, renounced all religion save that of Nyarlathotep. He sought the power of prophecy, and built temples to the Blind Ape of Truth. His utterly atrocious sacrifices at length provoked a revolt, and it is said that the infamous Pharaoh was at last dethroned. According to this account, the new ruler and his people immediately destroyed all vestiges of the former reign, demolished all temples and idols of Nyarlathotep, and drove out the wicked priests who prostituted their faith to the carnivorous Bubastis, Anubis, and Sebek. *The Book of the Dead* was then amended so that all references to the Pharaoh Nephren-Ka and his accursed cults were deleted.

Thus, argues the legend, the furtive faith was lost to reputable history. As to Nephren-Ka himself, a strange account is given of his end.

The story ran that the dethroned Pharaoh fled to a spot adjacent to what is now the modern city of Cairo. Here it was his intention to embark with his remaining followers for a "westward isle." Historians believe that this "isle" was Britain, where some of the fleeing priests of Bubastis actually settled.

But the Pharaoh was attacked and surrounded, his escape blocked. It was then that he had constructed a secret underground tomb, in which he caused himself and his followers to be interred alive. With him, in this vivisepulture, he took all his treasure and magical secrets, so that nothing would remain for his enemies to profit by. So cleverly did his remaining devotees contrive this secret crypt that the attackers were never able to discover the resting-place of the Black Pharaoh.

Thus the legend rests. According to common currency, the fable was handed down by the few remaining priests who actually stayed on the surface to seal the secret place; they and their descendants were believed to have perpetuated the story and the old faith of evil.

FOLLOWING up this exceedingly unusual story, Cartaret delved into the old tomes of the time. During a trip to London he was fortunate enough to be allowed an inspection of the unhallowed and archaic *Necronomicon* of Abdul Alhazred. In it were further emendations. One of his influential friends in the Home Office, hearing of his interest, managed to obtain for him a portion of Ludvig Prinn's evil and blasphemous *De Vermis Mysteriis,* known more familiarly to students of recondite arcana as *Mysteries of the Worm.* Here, in that greatly disputed chapter on oriental myth entitled *Saracenic Rituals,* Cartaret found still more concrete elaborations of the Nephren-Ka tale.

Prinn, who consorted with the mediæval seers and prophets of Saracen times in Egypt, gave a good deal of prominence to the whispered hints of Alexandrian necromancers and adepts. They knew the story of Nephren-Ka, and alluded to him as the Black Pharaoh.

Prinn's account of the Pharaoh's death was much more elaborate. He claimed that the secret tomb lay directly beneath

Cairo itself, and professed to believe that it had been opened and reached. He hinted at the cult-survival mentioned in the popular tales; spoke of a renegade group of descendants whose priestly ancestors had interred the rest alive. They were said to perpetuate the evil faith, and to act as guardians of the dead Nephren-Ka and his buried brethren, lest some interloper discover and violate his resting-place in the crypt. After the regular cycle of seven thousand years, the Black Pharaoh and his band would then arise once more, and restore the dark glory of the ancient faith.

The crypt itself, if Prinn is to be believed, was a most unusual place. Nephren-Ka's servants and slaves had builded him a mighty sepulcher, and the burrows were filled with the rich treasure of his reign. All of the sacred images were there, and the jeweled books of esoteric wisdom reposed within.

Most peculiarly did the account dwell on Nephren-Ka's search for the Truth and the Power of Prophecy. It was said that before he died down in the darkness, he conjured up the earthly image of Nyarlathotep in a final gigantic sacrifice; and that the god granted him his desires. Nephren-Ka had stood before the images of the Blind Ape of Truth and received the gift of divination over the gory bodies of a hundred willing victims. Then, in nightmare manner, Prinn recounts that the entombed Pharaoh wandered among his dead companions and inscribed on the twisted walls of his tomb the secrets of the future. In pictures and ideographs he wrote the history of days to come, revelling in omniscient knowledge till the end. He scrawled the destinies of kings to come; painted the triumphs and the dooms of unborn empires. Then, as the blackness of death shrouded his sight, and palsy wrenched the brush from his fingers, he betook himself in peace to his sarcophagus, and there died.

So said Ludvig Prinn, he that consorted with ancient seers. Nephren-Ka lay in his buried burrows, guarded by the priestly cult that still survived on Earth, and further protected by enchantments in his tomb below. He had fulfilled his desires at the end—he had known Truth, and written the lore of the future on the nighted walls of his own catacomb.

Cartaret had read all this with conflicting emotions. How he would like to find that tomb, if it existed! What a sensation—he would revolutionize anthropology, ethnology!

Of course, the legend had its absurd points. Cartaret, for all his research, was not superstitious. He didn't believe the bogus balderdash about Nyarlathotep, the Blind Ape of Truth, or the priestly cult. That part about the gift of prophecy was sheer drivel.

Such things were commonplace. There were many savants who had attempted to prove that the pyramids, in their geometrical construction, were archeological and architectural prophecies of days to come. With elaborate and convincing skill, they attempted to show that, symbolically interpreted, the great tombs held the key to history, that they allegorically foretold the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the Great War.

This, Cartaret believed, was rubbish. And the utterly absurd notion that a dying fanatic had been gifted with prophetic power and scrawled the future history of the world on his tomb as a last gesture before death—that was impossible to swallow.

Nevertheless, despite his skeptical attitude, Captain Cartaret wanted to find the tomb, if it existed. He had returned to Egypt with that intention, and immediately set to work. So far he had a number of clues and hints. If the machinery of

his investigation did not collapse, it was now only a matter of days before he would discover the actual entrance to the spot itself. Then he intended to enlist proper Governmental aid and make his discovery public to all.

This much he now told the silent Arab who had come out of the night with a strange proposal and a weird credential: the seal of the Black Pharaoh, Nephren-Ka.

3

When Cartaret finished his summary, he glanced at the dark stranger in interrogation.

"What next?" he asked.

"Follow me," said the other, urbanely. "I shall lead you to the spot you seek."

"Now?" gasped Cartaret. The other nodded.

"But—it's too sudden! I mean, the whole thing is like a dream. You come out of the night, unbidden and unknown, show me the Seal, and graciously offer to grant me my desires. Why? It doesn't make sense."

"This makes sense." The grave Arab indicated the black Seal.

"Yes," admitted Cartaret. "But—how can I trust you? Why must I go now? Wouldn't it be wiser to wait, and get the proper authorities behind us? Won't there be need of excavation; aren't there necessary instruments to take?"

"No." The other spread his palms upward. "Just come."

"Look here." Cartaret's suspicion crystallized in his sharp tones. "How do I know this isn't a trap? Why should you come to me this way? Who the devil are you?"

"Patience." The dark man smiled. "I shall explain all. I have listened to your accounts of the 'legend' with great interest, and while your facts are clear, your own view of them is mistaken. The 'legend' you have learned of is true—all of it. Nephren-Ka *did* write the future on the walls of his tomb when he died; he *did* possess the power of divination, and the priests who buried him formed a cult which *did* survive."

"Yes?" Cartaret was impressed, despite himself.

"I am one of those priests." The words stabbed like swords in the white man's brain.

"Do not look so shocked. It is the truth. I am a descendant of the original cult of Nephren-Ka, one of those inner initiates who have kept the legend alive. I worship the Power which the Black Pharaoh received, and I worship the god Nyarlathotep who accorded that Power to him. To us believers, the most sacred truth lies in the hieroglyphs inscribed by the divinely gifted Pharaoh before he died. Throughout the ages, we guardian priests have watched history unfold, and always it has agreed with the ideographs on those tunneled walls. We believe.

"It is because of our belief that I have sought you out. For within the secret crypt of the Black Pharaoh it is written upon the walls of the future that you shall descend there."

Stunning silence.

"Do you mean to say," Carteret gasped, "that those pictures *show* me discovering the spot?"

"They do," assented the dark man, slowly. "That is why I came to you unbidden. You shall come with me and fulfill the prophecy tonight, as it is written."

"Suppose I don't come?" flashed Captain Cartaret, suddenly. "What about your prophecy then?"

The Arab smiled. "You'll come," he said. "You know that."

Cartaret realized that it was so. Noth-

ing could keep him away from this amazing discovery. A thought struck him.

"If this wall really records the details of the future," he began, "perhaps you can tell me a little about my own coming history. Will this discovery make me famous? Will I return again to the spot? Is it written that I am to bring the secret of Nephren-Ka to light?"

The dark man looked grave. "That I do not know," he admitted. "I neglected to tell you something about the Walls of Truth. My ancestor—he who first descended into the secret spot after it had been sealed, he who first looked upon the work of prophecy—did a needful thing. Deeming that such wisdom was not for lesser mortals, he piously covered the walls with concealing tapestry. Thus none might look upon the future too far. As time passed, the tapestry was drawn back to keep pace with the actual events of history, and always they have coincided with the hieroglyphs. Through the ages, it has always been the duty of one priest to descend to the secret tomb each day and draw back the tapestry so as to reveal the events of the day that follows. Now, during my life, that is my mission. My fellows devote their time to the needful rites of worship in hidden places. I alone descend the concealed passage daily and draw back the curtain on the Walls of Truth. When I die, another will take my place. Understand me—the writing does not minutely concern every single event; merely those which affect the history and destiny of Egypt itself. Today, my friend, it was revealed that you should descend and enter into the place of your desire. What the morrow holds in store for you I cannot say, until the curtain is drawn once more."

Cartaret sighed. "I suppose that there is nothing else left but for me to go, then." His eagerness was ill dissembled. The dark man observed this at once, and smiled cynically, while he strode to the door.

"Follow me," he commanded.

To captain cartaret that walk through the moonlit streets of Cairo was blurred in chaotic dream. His guide led him into labyrinths of looming shadows; they wandered through the twisted native quarters and passed through a maze of unfamiliar alleys and thoroughfares. Cartaret strode mechanically at the dark stranger's heels, his thoughts avid for the great triumph to come.

He hardly noticed their passage through a dingy courtyard; when his companion drew up before an ancient well and pressed a niche revealing the passage beneath, he followed him as a matter of course. From somewhere the Arab had produced a flashlight. Its faint beam almost rebounded from the murk of the inky tunnel.

Together they descended a thousand stairs, into the ageless and eternal darkness that broods beneath. Like a blind man, Cartaret stumbled down—down into the depths of three thousand vanished years.

4

The temple was entered—the subterranean temple-tomb of Nephren-Ka. Through silver gates the priest passed, his dazed companion following behind.

Cartaret stood in a vast chamber, the niched walls of which were lined with sarcophagi.

"They hold the mummies of the interred priests and servants," explained his guide.

Strange were the mummy-cases of Nephren-Ka's followers, not like those known to Egyptology. The carven covers bore no recognized, conventional features as was the usual custom; instead they

presented the strange, grinning countenances of demons and creatures of fable. Jeweled eyes stared mockingly from the black visages of gargoyles spawned in a sculptor's nightmare. From every side of the room those eyes shone through the shadows; unwinking, unchanging, omniscient in this little world of the dead.

Cartaret stirred uneasily. Emerald eyes of death, ruby eyes of malevolence, yellow orbs of mockery; everywhere they confronted him. He was glad when his guide led him forward at last, so that the incongruous rays of the flashlight shone on the entrance beyond. A moment later his relief was dissipated by the sight of a new horror confronting him at the inner doorway.

Two gigantic figures shambled there, guarding either side of the opening—two monstrous, troglodytic figures. Great gorillas they were; enormous apes, carved in simian semblance from black stone. They faced the doorway, squatting on mighty haunches, their huge, hairy arms upraised in menace. Their glittering faces were brutally alive; they grinned, bare-fanged, with idiotic glee. And they were blind—eyeless and blind.

There was a terrible allegory in these figures which Carteret knew only too well. The blind apes were Destiny personified; a hulking, mindless Destiny whose sightless, stupid gropings trampled on the dreams of men and altered their lives by aimless flailings of purposeless paws. Thus did they control reality.

These were the Blind Apes of Truth, according to the ancient legend; the symbols of the old gods worshipped by Nephren-Ka.

Cartaret thought of the myths once more, and trembled. If tales were true, Nephren-Ka had offered up that final mighty sacrifice upon the obscene laps of these evil idols; offered them up to Nyarlathotep, and buried the dead in the mummy-cases set here in the niches. Then he had gone on to his own sepulcher within.

The guide proceeded stolidly past the looming figures. Cartaret, dissembling his dismay, started to follow. For a moment his feet refused to cross that gruesomely guarded threshold into the room beyond. He stared upward to the eyeless, ogreish faces that leered down from dizzying heights, with the feeling that he walked in realms of sheer nightmare. But the huge arms beckoned him on; the unseeing faces were convulsed in a smile of mocking invitation.

The legends were true. The tomb existed. Would it not be better to turn back now, seek sane aid, and return again to this spot? Besides, what unguessed terror might not lair in the realms beyond; what horror spawn in the sable shadows of Nephren-Ka's inner, secret sepulcher? All reason urged him to call out to the strange priest and retreat to safety.

But the voice of reason was but a hushed and awe-stricken whisper here in the brooding burrows of the past. This was a realm of ancient shadow, where antique evil ruled. Here the incredible was real, and there was a potent fascination in fear itself.

Cartaret knew that he must go on; curiosity, cupidity, the lust for concealed knowledge—all impelled him. And the Blind Apes grinned their challenge, or command.

THE priest entered the third chamber, and Cartaret followed. Crossing the threshold, he plunged into an abyss of unreality.

The room was lighted by braziers set in a thousand stations; their glow bathed the enormous burrow with fiery luminance. Captain Cartaret, his head reeling from the heat and mephitic miasma of

the place, was thus able to see the entire extent of this incredible cavern.

Seemingly endless, a vast corridor stretched on a downward slant into the earth beyond—a vast corridor, utterly barren, save for the winking red braziers along the walls. Their flaming reflections cast grotesque shadows that glimmered with unnatural life. Cartaret felt as though he were gazing on the entrance to Kameter—the mythical underworld of Egyptian lore.

"Here we are," said his guide, softly.

The unexpected sound of a human voice was startling. For some reason, it frightened Cartaret more than he cared to admit; he had fallen into a vague acceptance of these scenes as being part of a fantastic dream. Now, the concrete clarity of a spoken word only confirmed an eery reality.

Yes, here they were, in the spot of legend, the place known to Alhazred, Prinn, and all the dark delvers into unhallowed history. The tale of Nephren-Ka was true, and if so, what about the rest of this strange priest's statements? What about the Walls of Truth, on which the Black Pharaoh had recorded the future, had foretold Cartaret's own advent on the secret spot?

As if in answer to these inner whispers, the guide smiled.

"Come, Captain Cartaret; do you not wish to examine the walls more closely?"

The captain did not wish to examine the walls; desperately, he did not. For they, if in existence, would confirm the ghastly horror that gave them being. If they existed, it meant that the whole evil legend was real; that Nephren-Ka, Black Pharaoh of Egypt, had indeed sacrificed to the dread dark gods, and that they had answered his prayer. Captain Cartaret did not greatly wish to believe in such utterly blasphemous abominations as Nyarlathotep.

He sparred for time.

"Where is the tomb of Nephren-Ka himself?" he asked. "Where are the treasure and the ancient books?"

The guide extended a lean forefinger.

"At the end of this hall," he exclaimed.

Peering down the infinity of lighted walls, Cartaret indeed fancied that his eyes could detect a dark blur of objects in the dim distance.

"Let us go there," he said.

The guide shrugged. He turned, and his feet moved over the velvet dust.

Cartaret followed, as if drugged.

"The walls," he thought. "I must not look at the walls. The Walls of Truth. The Black Pharaoh sold his soul to Nyarlathotep and received the gift of prophecy. Before he died here he wrote the future of Egypt on the walls. I must not look, lest I believe. I must not know."

Red lights glittered on either side. Step after step, light after light. Glare, gloom, glare, gloom, glare.

The lights beckoned, enticed, attracted. "Look at us," they commanded. "See, dare to see all."

Cartaret followed his silent conductor.

"Look!" flashed the lights.

Cartaret's eyes grew glassy. His head throbbed. The gleaming of the lights was mesmeric; they hypnotized with their allure.

"Look!"

Would this great hall never end? No; there were thousands of feet to go.

"Look!" challenged the leaping lights.

Red serpent eyes in the underground dark; eyes of tempters, bringers of black knowledge.

"Look! Wisdom! Know!" winked the lights.

They flamed in Cartaret's brain. Why not look—it was so easy? Why fear?

Why? His dazed mind repeated the question. Each following flare of fire weakened the question.

At last, Cartaret looked.

5

MAD minutes passed before he was able to speak. Then he mumbled in a voice audible only to himself.

"True," he whispered. "All true."

He stared at the towering wall to his left, limned in red radiance. It was an interminable *Bayeux tapestry* carved in stone. The drawing was crude, in black and white, but it *frightened*. This was no ordinary Egyptian picture-writing; it was not in the fantastic, symbolical style of ordinary hieroglyphics. That was the terrible part: Nephren-Ka was a realist. His men looked like men, his buildings were buildings. There was nothing here but a representation of stark reality, and it was dreadful to see.

For at the point where Cartaret first summoned sufficient courage to gaze he stared at an unmistakable tableau involving Crusaders and Saracens.

Crusaders of the Thirteenth Century—yet Nephren-Ka had then been dust for nearly two thousand years!

The pictures were small, yet vivid and distinct; they seemed to flow along quite effortlessly on the wall, one scene blending into another as though they had been drawn in unbroken continuity. It was as though the artist had not stopped once during his work; as though he had untiringly proceeded to cover this gigantic hall in a single supernatural effort.

That was it—a single *supernatural* effort!

Cartaret could not doubt. Rationalize all he would, it was impossible to believe that these drawings were trumped up by any group of artists. It was one man's work. And the unerring horrid consistency of it; the calculated picturization of the most vital and important phases of Egyptian history could have been set down in such accurate order only by a historical authority or a prophet. Nephren-Ka had been given the gift of prophecy. And so . . .

As he ruminated in growing dread, Cartaret and his guide proceeded. Now that he had looked, a Medusian fascination held the man's eyes to the wall. He walked with history tonight; history and red nightmare. Flaming figures leered from every side.

He saw the rise of the Mameluke Empire, looked on the despots and the tyrants of the East. Not all of what he saw was familiar to Cartaret, for history has its forgotten pages. Besides, the scenes changed and varied at almost every step, and it was quite confusing. There was one picture interspersed with an Alexandrian court motif which depicted a catacomb evidently in some vaults beneath the city. Here were gathered a number of men in robes which bore a curious similarity to those of Cartaret's present guide. They were conversing with a tall, white-bearded man whose crudely drawn figure seemed to exude an uncanny aura of black and baleful power.

"Ludvig Prinn," said the guide, softly, noting Cartaret's stare. "He mingled with our priests, you know."

For some reason the depiction of this almost legendary seer stirred Cartaret more deeply than any other hitherto revealed terror. The casual inclusion of the infamous sorcerer in the procession of actual history hinted at dire things; it was as though Cartaret had read a prosaic biography of Satan in *Who's Who*.

Nevertheless, with a sort of heartsick craving his eyes continued to search the walls as they walked onward to the still indeterminate end of the long red-illumined chamber in which Nephren-Ka

was interred. The guide—priest, now, for Cartaret no longer doubted—proceeded softly, but stole covert glances at the white man as he led the way.

Captain Cartaret walked through a dream. Only the walls were real now: the Walls of Truth. He saw the Othmans rise and flourish, looked on forgotten battles and unremembered kings. Often there recurred in the sequence a scene depicting the priests of Nephren-Ka's own furtive cult. They were shown amidst the disquieting surroundings of catacombs and tombs, engaged in unsavory occupations and revolting pleasures. The camera-film of time rolled on; Captain Cartaret and his companion walked on. Still the walls told their story.

There was one small division of the wall which portrayed the priests conducting a man in Elizabethan costume through what seemed to be a pyramid. It was eery to see the gallant in his finery pictured amidst the ruins of ancient Egypt, and it was very dreadful indeed to almost watch, like an unseen observer, when a stealthy priest knifed the Englishman in the back as he bent over a mummy-case.

What now impressed Cartaret was the infinitude of detail in each pictured fragment. The features of all the men were almost photographically exact; the drawing, while crude, was life-like and realistic. Even the furniture and background of every scene were correct. There was no doubting the authenticity of it all, and no doubting of the veracity thereby implied. But—what was worse—there was no doubting that this work could not have been done by any normal artist, however learned, unless he had seen it all.

Nephren-Ka had seen it all in prophetic vision, after his sacrifice to Nyarlathotep.

Cartaret was looking at truths inspired by a demon. . . .

On and on, to the flaming fane of worship and death at the end of the hall. History progressed as he walked. Now he was looking at a period of Egyptian lore that was almost contemporary. The figure of Napoleon appeared.

The battle of Aboukir . . . the massacre of the pyramids . . . the downfall of the Mameluke horsemen . . . the entrance to Cairo. . . .

Once again, a catacomb with priests. And three figures, white men, in French military regalia of the period. The priests were leading them into a red room. The Frenchmen were surprized, overcome, slaughtered.

It was vaguely familiar. Cartaret was recalling what he knew of Napoleon's commission; he had appointed savants and scientists to investigate the tombs and pyramids of the land. The Rosetta stone had been discovered, and other things. Quite likely the three men shown had blundered onto a mystery the priests of Nephren-Ka had not wanted to have unveiled. Hence they had been lured to death as the walls showed. It was quite familiar—but there was *another* familiarity which Cartaret could not place.

THEY moved on, and the years rushed by in panorama. The Turks, the English, Gordon, the plundering of the pyramids, the World War. And ever so often, a picture of the priests of Nephren-Ka and a strange white man in some catacomb or vault. Always the white man died. It was all *familiar.*

Cartaret looked up, and saw that he and the priest were very near to the blackness at the end of the great fiery hall. Only a hundred steps or so, in fact. The priest, face hidden in his burnoose, was beckoning him on.

Cartaret looked at the wall. The pic-

tures were almost ended. But no—just ahead was a great curtain of crimson velvet on a ceiling-rack which ran off into the blackness and reappeared from shadows on the opposite side of the room to cover that wall.

"The future," explained his guide. And Captain Cartaret remembered that the priest had told how each day he drew back the curtain a bit so that the future was always revealed just one day ahead. He remembered something else, and hastily glanced at the last visible section of the Wall of Truth next to the curtain. He gasped.

It was true! Almost as though gazing into a miniature mirror he found himself staring *into his own face!*

Line for line, feature for feature, posture for posture, he and the priest of Nephren-Ka were shown standing together in this red chamber just as they were now.

The red chamber . . . familiarity. The Elizabethan man with the priests of Nephren-Ka were in a catacomb when the man was murdered. The French scientists were in a red chamber when they died. Other later Egyptologists had been shown in a red chamber with the priests, and they too had been slain. The red chamber! Not familiarity but *similarity!* They had been in *this chamber!* And now he stood here, with a priest of Nephren-Ka. The others had died because they had known too much. Too much about what —Nephren-Ka?

A terrible suspicion began to formulate into hideous reality. The priests of Nephren-Ka protected their own. This tomb of their dead leaders was also their fane, their temple. When intruders stumbled onto the secret, they lured them down here and killed them lest others learn too much.

Had not he come in the same way?

The priest stood silent as he gazed at the Wall of Truth.

"Midnight," he said softly. "I must draw back the curtain to reveal yet another day before we go on. You expressed a wish, Captain Cartaret, to see what the future holds in store for you. Now that wish shall be granted."

With a sweeping gesture he flung the curtain back along the wall for a foot. Then he moved, swiftly.

One hand leapt from the burnoose. A gleaming knife flashed through the air, drawing red fire from the lamps, then sank into Cartaret's back, drawing redder blood.

With a single groan, the white man fell. In his eyes there was a look of supreme horror, not born of death alone. For as he fell, Captain Cartaret read his future in the Walls of Truth, and it confirmed a madness that could not be.

As Captain Cartaret died he looked at the picture of his next hours of existence *and saw himself being knifed by the priest of Nephren-Ka.*

The priest vanished from the silent tomb, just as the last flicker of dying eyes showed to Cartaret the picture of a still white body—*his body*—lying in death before the Wall of Truth.

"The droning voice ringing in his ears issued from this nightmare creature."

The Black Stone Statue

By MARY ELIZABETH COUNSELMAN

An amazing tale of weird sculpture—the story of a weird deception practised on the world by an obscure artist—by the author of "The Three Marked Pennies"

DIRECTORS,
Museum of Fine Arts,
Boston, Mass.

Gentlemen:

Today I have just received aboard the *S. S. Madrigal* your most kind cable, praising my work and asking—humbly, as one might ask it of a true genius!—if I would do a statue of myself to be placed among the great in your illustrious museum. Ah, gentlemen, that cablegram was to me the last turn of the screw!

I despise myself for what I have done in the name of art. Greed for money and acclaim, weariness with poverty and the

contempt of my inferiors, hatred for a world that refused to see any merit in my work: these things have driven me to commit a series of strange and terrible crimes.

In these days I have thought often of suicide as a way out—a coward's way, leaving me the fame I do not deserve. But since receiving your cablegram, lauding me for what I am not and never could be, I am determined to write this letter for the world to read. It will explain everything. And having written it, I shall then atone for my sin in (to you, perhaps) a horribly ironic manner but (to me) one that is most fitting.

Let me go back to that miserable sleet-lashed afternoon as I came into the hall of Mrs. Bates's rooming-house—a crawling, filthy hovel for the poverty-stricken, like myself, who were too proud to go on relief. When I stumbled in, drenched and dizzy with hunger, our landlady's ample figure was blocking the hallway. She was arguing with a tall, shabbily dressed young man whose face I was certain I had seen somewhere before.

"Just a week," his deep, pleasant voice was beseeching the old harridan. "I'll pay you double at the end of that time, just as soon as I can put over a deal I have in mind."

I paused, staring at him covertly while I shook the sleet from my hat-brim. Fine gray eyes met mine across the landlady's head—haggard now, and overbright with suppressed excitement. There was strength, character, in that face under its stubble of mahogany-brown beard. There was, too, a firm set to the man's shoulders and beautifully formed head. Here, I told myself, was someone who had lived all his life with dangerous adventure, someone whose clean-cut features, even under that growth of beard, seemed vaguely familiar to my sculptor's-eye for detail.

"Not one day, no sirree!" Mrs. Bates had folded her arms stubbornly. A week's rent in advance, or ye don't step foot into one o' *my* rooms!"

On impulse I moved forward, digging into my pocket. I smiled at the young man and thrust almost my last two dollars into the landlady's hand. Smirking, she bobbed off and left me alone with the stranger.

"You shouldn't have done that," he sighed, and gripped my hand hard. "Thanks, old man. I'll repay you next week, though. Next week," he whispered, and his eyes took on a glow of anticipation, "I'll write you a check for a thousand dollars. Two thousand!"

He laughed delightedly at my quizzical expression and plunged out into the storm again, whistling.

In that moment his identity struck me like a blow. Paul Kennicott—the young aviator whose picture had been on the front page of every newspaper in the country a few months ago! His plane had crashed somewhere in the Brazilian wilds, and the nation mourned him and his co-pilot for dead. Why was he sneaking back into New York like a criminal—penniless, almost hysterical with excitement, with an air of secrecy about him—to hide himself here in the slum district?

I CLIMBED the rickety stairs to my shabby room and was plying the chisel half-heartedly on my *Dancing Group*, when suddenly I became aware of a peculiar buzzing sound, like an angry bee shut up in a jar. I slapped my ears several times, annoyed, believing the noise to be in my own head. But it kept on, growing louder by the moment.

It seemed to come from the hall; and simultaneously I heard the stair-steps creak just outside my room.

Striding to the door, I jerked it open—to see Paul Kennicott tiptoeing up the stairs in stealthy haste. He started vio-

lently at sight of me and attempted to hide under his coat an odd black box he was carrying.

But it was too large: almost two feet square, roughly fashioned of wood and the canvas off an airplane wing. But this was not immediately apparent, for the whole thing seemed to be covered with a coat of shiny black enamel. When it bumped against the balustrade, however, it gave a solid metallic sound, unlike cloth-covered wood. That humming noise, I was sharply aware, came from inside the box.

I stepped out into the hall and stood blocking the passage rather grimly.

"Look here," I snapped. "I know who you are, Kennicott, but I don't know why you're hiding out like this. What's it all about? You'll tell me, or I'll turn you over to the police!"

Panic leaped into his eyes. They pleaded with me silently for an instant, and then we heard the plodding footsteps of Mrs. Bates come upstairs.

"Who's got that raddio?" her querulous voice preceded her. "I hear it hummin'! Get it right out of here if you don't wanta pay me extry for the 'lectricity it's burnin'."

"Oh, ye gods!" Kennicott groaned frantically. "Stall her! Don't let that gabby old fool find out about this—it'll ruin everything! Help me, and I'll tell you the whole story."

He darted past me without waiting for my answer and slammed the door after him. The droning noise subsided and then was swiftly muffled so that it was no longer audible.

Mrs. Bates puffed up the stairs and eyed me accusingly. "So it's you that's got that raddio? I told you the day you come——"

"All right," I said, pretending annoyance. "I've turned it off, and anyhow it goes out tomorrow. I was just keeping it for a friend."

"Eh? Well——" She eyed me sourly, then sniffed and went on back downstairs, muttering under her breath.

I strode to Kennicott's door and rapped softly. A key grated in the lock and I was admitted by my wild-eyed neighbor. On the bed, muffled by pillows, lay the black box humming softly on a shrill note.

"I n—n n—ng—ng!" it went, exactly like a radio tuned to a station that is temporarily off the air.

Curiosity was gnawing at my vitals. Impatiently I watched Kennicott striding up and down the little attic room, striking one fist against the other palm.

"Well?" I demanded.

And with obvious reluctance, in a voice jerky with excitement, he began to unfold the secret of the thing inside that onyx-like box. I sat on the bed beside it, my eyes riveted on Kennicott's face, spellbound by what he was saying.

"OUR plane," he began, "was demolished. We made a forced landing in the center of a dense jungle. If you know Brazil at all, you'll know what it was like. Trees, trees, trees! Crawling insects as big as your fist. A hot sickening smell of rotting vegetation, and now and then the screech of some animal or bird eery enough to make your hair stand on end. We cracked up right in the middle of nowhere.

"I crawled out of the wreckage with only a sprained wrist and a few minor cuts, but McCrea—my co-pilot, you know—got a broken leg and a couple of bashed ribs. He was in a bad way, poor devil! Fat little guy, bald, scared of women, and always cracking wise about something. A swell sport."

The aviator's face convulsed briefly, and he stared at the box on the bed be-

side me with a peculiar expression of loathing.

"McCrea's' dead, then?" I prompted.

Kennicott nodded his head dully, and shrugged. "God only knows! I guess you'd call it death. But let me get on with it.

"We slashed and sweated our way through an almost impenetrable wall of undergrowth for two days, carrying what food and cigarets we had in that makeshift box there."

A thumb-jerk indicated the square black thing beside me, droning softly without a break on the same high note.

"McCrea was running a fever, though, so we made camp and I struck out to find water. When I came back——"

Kennicott choked. I stared at him, waiting until his hoarse voice went on doggedly:

"When I came back, McCrea was gone. I called and called. No answer. Then, thinking he might have wandered away delirious, I picked out his trail and followed it into the jungle. It wasn't hard to do, because he had to break a path through that wall of undergrowth, and now and then I'd find blood on a bramble or maybe a scrap of torn cloth from his khaki shirt.

"Not more than a hundred yards south of our camp I suddenly became aware of a queer humming sound in my ears. Positive that this had drawn McCrea, I followed it. It got louder and louder, like the drone of a powerful dynamo. It seemed to fill the air and set all the trees to quivering. My teeth were on edge with the monotony of it, but I kept on, and unexpectedly found myself walking into a patch of jungle that was *all black!* Not burnt in a forest fire, as I first thought, but dead-black in every detail. Not a spot of color anywhere; and in that jungle with all its vivid foliage, the effect really slapped you in the face! It was as though somebody had turned out the lights and yet you could still distinguish the formation of every object around you. It was uncanny!

"There was black sand on the ground as far as I could see. Not soft jungle-soil, damp and fertile. This stuff was as hard and dry as emery, and it glittered like soft coal. All the trees were black and shiny like anthracite, and not a leaf stirred anywhere, not an insect crawled. I almost fainted as I realized why.

"It was a petrified forest!

"Those trees, leaves and all, had turned into a shiny black kind of stone that looked like coal but was much harder. It wouldn't chip when I struck it with a fallen limb of the same stuff. It wouldn't bend; I simply had to squeeze through holes in underbrush more rigid than cast iron. And all black, mind you—a jungle of fuliginous rock like something out of Dante's *Inferno.*

"Once I stumbled over an object and stopped to pick it up. It was McCrea's canteen—the only thing in sight, besides myself, that was not made of that queer black stone. He had come this way, then. Relieved, I started shouting his name again, but the sound of my voice frightened me. The silence of that place fairly pressed against my eardrums, broken only by that steady droning sound. But, you see, I'd become so used to it, like the constant ticking of a clock, that I hardly heard it.

"Panic swept over me all at once, an unreasonable fear, as the sound of my own voice banged against the trees and came back in a thousand echoes, borne on that humming sound that never changed its tone. I don't know why; maybe it was the grinding monotony of it and the unrelieved black of that stone forest. But my nerve snapped and I bolted back along the way I had come, sobbing like a kid.

"I must have run in a circle, though, tripping and cutting myself on that rock-underbrush. In my terror I forgot the direction of our camp. I was lost—abruptly I realized it—lost in that hell of coal-black stone, without food or any chance of getting it, with McCrea's empty canteen in my hand and no idea where he had wandered in his fever.

"For hours I plunged on, forgetting to back-track, and cursing aloud because McCrea wouldn't answer me. That humming noise had got on my nerves now, droning on that one shrill note until I thought I would go mad. Exhausted, I sank down on that emery-sand, crouched against the trunk of a black stone tree. McCrea had deserted me, I thought crazily. Someone had rescued him and he had left me here to die—which should give you an idea of my state of mind.

"I huddled there, letting my eyes rove in a sort of helpless stupor. On the sand beside me was a tiny rock that resembled a butterfly delicately carved out of onyx. I picked it up dazedly, staring at its hard little legs and feelers like wire that would neither bend nor break off. And then my gaze started wandering again.

"It fastened on something a few dozen paces to my right—and I was sure then that I had gone mad. At first it seemed to be a stump of that same dark mineral. But it wasn't a stump. I crawled over to it and sat there, gaping at it with my senses reeling, while that humming noise rang louder and louder in my ears.

"It was a black stone statue of McCrea, perfect in every detail!

"He was depicted stooping over, with one hand holding out his automatic gripped by the barrel. His stocky figure, aviator's helmet, his makeshift crutch, and even the splints on his broken leg were shiny black stone. And his face, to the last hair of his eyelashes, was a perfect mask of black rock set in an expression of puzzled curiosity.

"I GOT to my feet and walked around the figure, then gave it a push. It toppled over, just like a statue, and the sound of its fall was deafening in that silent forest. Hefting it, I was amazed to find that it weighed less than twenty pounds. I hacked at it with a file we had brought from the plane in lieu of a machete, but only succeeded in snapping the tool in half. Not a chip flew off the statue. Not a dent appeared in its polished surface.

"The thing was so unspeakably weird that I did not even try to explain it to myself, but started calling McCrea again. If it was a gag of some kind, he could explain it. But there was no answer to my shouts other than the monotonous hum of that unseen dynamo.

"Instead of frightening me more, this weird discovery seemed to jerk me up short. Collecting my scattered wits, I started back-trailing myself to the camp, thinking McCrea might have returned in my absence. The droning noise was so loud now, it pained my eardrums unless I kept my hands over my ears. This I did, stumbling along with my eyes glued to my own footprints in the hard dry sand.

"And suddenly I brought up short. Directly ahead of me, under a black stone bush, lay something that made me gape with my mouth ajar.

"I can't describe it—no one could. It resembled nothing so much as a star-shaped blob of transparent jelly that shimmered and changed color like an opal. It appeared to be some lower form of animal, one-celled, not large, only about a foot in circumference when it stretched those feelers out to full length. It oozed along over the sand like a snail,

groping its way with those star-points—*and it hummed!*

"The droning noise ringing in my ears issued from this nightmare creature!

"It was nauseating to watch, and yet beautiful, too, with all those iridescent colors gleaming against that setting of dead-black stone. I approached within a pace of it, started to nudge it with my foot, but couldn't quite bring myself to touch the squashy thing. And I've thanked my stars ever since for being so squeamish!

"Instead, I took off my flying-helmet and tossed the goggles directly in the path of the creature. It did not pause or turn aside, but merely reached out one of those sickening feelers and brushed the goggles very lightly.

"And they turned to stone!

"Just that! God be my witness that those leather and glass goggles grew black before my starting eyes. In less than a minute they were petrified into hard fuliginous rock like everything else around me.

"In one hideous moment I realized the meaning of that weirdly life-like statue of McCrea. I knew what he had done. He had prodded this jelly-like Thing with his automatic, and it had turned him—and everything in contact with him—into shiny dark stone.

"Nausea overcame me. I wanted to run, to escape the sight of that oozing horror, but reason came to my rescue. I reminded myself that I was Paul Kennicott, intrepid explorer. Through a horrible experience McCrea and I had stumbled upon something in the Brazilian wilds which would revolutionize the civilized world. McCrea was dead, or in some ghastly suspended form of life, through his efforts to solve the mystery. I owed it to him and to myself not to lose my head now.

"For the practical possibilities of the Thing struck me like a blow. That black stone the creature's touch created from any earth-substance—by rays from its body, by a secretion of its glands, by God knows what strange metamorphosis—was indestructible! Bridges, houses, buildings, roads, could be built of ordinary material and then petrified by the touch of this jelly-like Thing which had surely tumbled from some planet with life-forces diametrically opposed to our own.

"Millions of dollars squandered on construction each year could be diverted to other phases of life, for no cyclone or flood could damage a city built of this hard black rock.

"I said a little prayer for my martyred co-pilot, and then and there resolved to take the creature back to civilization with me.

"It could be trapped, I was sure—though the prospect appealed to me far less than that of caging a hungry leopard! I did not venture to try it until I had studied the problem from every angle, however, and made certain deductions through experiment.

"I found that any substance already petrified was insulated against the thing's power. I tossed my belt on it, saw it freeze into black rock, then put my wrist-watch in contact with the rock belt. My watch remain.d as it was. Another phenomenon I discovered was that petrifaction also occurred in things in *direct contact* with something the creature touched, if that something was not already petrified.

"Dropping my glove fastened to my signet ring, I let the creature touch only the glove. But both objects were petrified. I tried it again with a chain of three objects, and discovered that the touched object and the one in contact with it turned into black rock, while the third on the chain remained unaffected.

"IT TOOK me about three days to trap the thing, although it gave no more actual resistance, of course, than a large snail. McCrea, poor devil, had blundered into the business; but I went at it in a scientific manner, knowing what danger I faced from the creature. I found my way again to our camp and brought back our provision box—yes, the one there on the bed beside you. When the thing's touch had turned it into a perfect stone cage for itself, I scooped it inside with petrified branches. But, Lord! How the sweat stood out on my face at the prospect of a slip that might make me touch the horrible little organism!

"The trip out of that jungle was a nightmare. I spent almost all I had, hiring scared natives to guide me a mile or so before they'd bolt with terror of my humming box. On board a tramp steamer bound for the States, I nearly lost my captive. The first mate thought it was an infernal machine and tried to throw it overboard. My last cent went to shut him up; so I landed in New York flat broke."

Paul Kennicott laughed and spread his hands. "But here I am. I don't dare go to anyone I know just yet. Reporters will run me ragged, and I want plenty of time to make the right contacts. Do you realize what's in that box?" He grinned with boyish delight. "Fame and fortune, that's what! McCrea's family will never know want again. Science will remember our names along with Edison and Bell and all the rest. We've discovered a new force that will rock the world with its possibilities. That's why," he explained, "I've sneaked into the country like an alien. If the wrong people heard of this first, my life wouldn't be worth a dime, understand? There are millions involved in this thing. Billions! Don't you see?"

He stopped, eyeing me anxiously. I stared at him and rose slowly from the bed. Thoughts were seething in my mind—dark ugly thoughts, ebbing and flowing to the sound of that *"i—n n—n n g—n n g!"* that filled the shabby room.

For, I did see the possibilities of that jelly-like thing's power to turn any object into black stone. But I was thinking as a sculptor. What do I care for roads or buildings? Sculpture is my whole life! To my mind's eye rose the picture of co-pilot McCrea as Kennicott had described him—a figure, perfect to the last detail, done in black stone.

Kennicott was still eyeing me anxiously—perhaps reading the ugly thoughts that flitted like shadows behind my eyes.

"You'll keep mum?" he begged. "Do that for me, old boy, and I'll set you up in a studio beyond your wildest dreams. I'll build up your fame as—what are you?"

His gray eyes fastened on my dirty smock.

"Some kind of an artist? I'll show you how much I appreciate your help. Are you with me?"

Some kind of an artist! Perhaps if he had not said that, flaying my crushed pride and ambition to the quick, I would never have done the awful thing I did. But black jealousy rose in my soul—jealousy of this eager young man who could walk out into the streets now with his achievement and make the world bow at his feet, while I in my own field was no more to the public than what he had called me: "some kind of an artist." At that moment I knew precisely what I wanted to do.

I did not meet his frank gray eyes. Instead, I pinned my gaze on that droning black box as my voice rasped harshly:

"No! Do you really imagine that I believe this idiotic story of yours? You're

insane! I'm going to call the police—they'll find out what really happened to McCrea out there in the jungle! There's nothing in that box. It's just a trick."

Kennicott's mouth fell open, then closed in an angry line. The next moment he shrugged and laughed.

"Of course you don't believe me," he nodded. "Who could?—unless they had seen what I've seen with my own eyes. Here," he said briskly, "I'll take this book and drop it in the box for you. You'll see the creature, and you'll see this book turned into black stone."

I stepped back, heart pounding, eyes narrowed. Kennicott leaned over the bed, unfastened the box gingerly with a wary expression on his face, and motioned me to approach. Briefly I glanced over his shoulder as he dropped the book inside the open box.

I saw horror—a jelly-like, opalescent thing like a five-pointed star. It pulsed and quivered for an instant, and the room fairly rocked to the unmuffled sound of that vibrant humming.

I also saw the small cloth-bound book Kennicott had dropped inside. It lay half on top of the squirming creature—a book carved out of black stone.

"There! You see?" Kennicott pointed. And those were the last words he ever uttered.

Remembering what he had said about the power of the creature being unable to penetrate to a third object, I snatched at Kennicott's sleeve-covered arm, gave him a violent shove, and saw his muscular hand plunge for an instant deep into the black box. The sleeve hardened beneath my fingers.

I cowered back, sickened at what I had done.

Paul Kennicott, his arms thrown out and horror stamped on his fine young face, had frozen into a statue of black shiny stone!

Then footsteps were clumping up the stairs again. I realized that Mrs. Bates would surely have heard the violent droning that issued from the open box. I shut it swiftly, muffled it, and shoved it under the bed.

I was at my own doorway when the landlady came puffing up the stairs. My face was calm, my voice contained, and no one but me could hear the furious pounding of my heart.

"Now, you look a-here!" Mrs. Bates burst out. "I told you to turn that raddio off. You take it right out of my room this minute! Runnin' up my bill for 'lectricity!"

I apologized meekly and with a great show carried out a tool-case of mine, saying it was the portable radio I had been testing for a friend. It satisfied her for the moment, but later, as I was carrying the black stone figure of Paul Kennicott to my own room, she caught me at it.

"Why," the old snoop exclaimed. "If that ain't the spittin' image of our new roomer! Friend of yours, is he?"

I thought swiftly and lied jauntily. "A model of mine. I've been working on this statue at night, the reason you haven't seen him going in and out. I thought I would have to rent a room for him here, but as the statue is finished now, it won't be necessary after all. You may keep the rent money, though," I added. "And get me a taxi to haul my masterpiece to the express station. I am ready to submit it to the Museum of Fine Arts."

And that is my story, gentlemen. The black stone statue which, ironically, I chose to call *Fear of the Unknown,* is not a product of my skill. (Small wonder several people have noticed its resemblance to the "lost explorer," Paul Kennicott!) Nor did I do the group of

soldiers commissioned by the Anti-War Association. None of my so-called *Symphonies in Black* were wrought by my hand—but I can tell you what became of the models who were unfortunate enough to pose for me!

My real work is perhaps no better than that of a rank novice, although up to that fatal afternoon I had honestly believed myself capable of great work as a sculptor some day.

But I am an impostor. You want a statue of me, you say in your cablegram, done in the mysterious black stone which has made me so famous? Ah, gentlemen, you shall have that statue!

I am writing this confession aboard the *S. S. Madrigal,* and I shall leave it with a steward to be mailed to you at our next port of call.

Tonight I shall take out of my stateroom the hideous thing in its black box which has never left my side. Such a creature, contrary to all nature on this earth of ours, should be exterminated. As soon as darkness falls I shall stand on deck and balance the box on the rail so that it will fall into the sea after my hand has touched what is inside.

I wonder if the process of being turned into that black rock is painful, or if it is accompanied only by a feeling of lethargy? And McCrea, Paul Kennicott, and those unfortunate models whom I have passed off as "my work"—are they dead, as we know death, or are their statues sentient and possessed of nerves? How does that jelly creature feel to the touch? Does it impart a violent electrical shock or a subtle emanation of some force beyond our ken, changing the atom-structure of the flesh it turns into stone?

Many such questions have occurred to me often in the small hours when I lie awake, tortured by remorse for what I have done.

But tonight, gentlemen, I shall know all the answers.

The Old House on the Hill

By WINONA MONTGOMERY GILLILAND

From the wide valley, I looked up and saw
The house upon the hill, that I had seen
So many times before. By every law
It should have seemed, just what it long had been,
An old house that someone, with loving care,
Had painted white; at doors and windows hung
Green-painted shutters. But it had an air
Of difference, today. The wind had flung,
Or some hand closed, the shutters on the doors,
French-doors, with windows over them; the trim
Between shone white, through pines and sycamores,
To form two crosses, and my eyes grew dim.
I thought, "There is no home without its cross
Hidden about it somewhere; pain—or loss."

Flames of Vengeance

By SEABURY QUINN

A strange doom hung over young Pemberton and his wife, a brooding horror spawned in India and transplanted to America in all its murderous potency—a brilliant exploit of Jules de Grandin

WITH intently narrowed eyes, lips pursed in concentration, Jules de Grandin stood enveloped in a gayly flowered apron while he measured out the olive oil as an apothecary might decant a precious drug. In the casserole before him lay the lobster meat, the shredded bass, the oysters, the crab-meat and the eel. Across the stove from him Nora McGinnis, my household factotum and the finest cook in northern Jersey, gazed at him like a nun breathless with adoration.

"Mon Dieu," he whispered reverently, "one little drop too much and he is ruined, a single drop too few and he is simply spoiled! Observe me, *ma petite,* see how I drop *l'essence de l'olive——"*

The door-bell's clangor broke the silence like a raucous laugh occurring at a funeral service. Nora jumped a full six inches, the olive oil ran trickling from the cruet, splashing on the prepared sea-food in the sauce-pan. Small Frenchman and big Irishwoman exchanged a look of consternation, a look such as the Lord Chancellor might give the Lord Chief Justice if at the moment of anointment the Archbishop were to pour the ampulla's entire contents on the unsuspecting head of Britain's new-crowned king. The bouillabaisse was ruined!

"Bring him here!" bade Jules de Grandin in a choking voice. "Bring the vile miscreant here, and I shall cut his black heart out; I shall pull his so vile nose! I shall——"

"Indade an' ye'll not," protested Nora. " 'Tis meself as'll take me hand off'n th' side of 'is face——"

"I'd better leave you with your sorrow," I broke in as I tiptoed toward the door. "It's probably a patient, and I can't afford to have you commit mayhem on my customers."

"Doctor de Grandin?" asked the young man at the door. "I've a letter to you from——"

"Come into the study," I invited. "Doctor de Grandin's occupied right now, but he'll see you in a minute."

The visitor was tall and lean, not thin, but trained down to bone and muscle, and his face possessed that brownish tinge which tells of residence in the tropics. His big nose, high cheekbones and sandy hair, together with his smartly clipped mustache, would have labeled him a Briton, even had he lacked the careless nonchalance of dress and Oxford accent which completed his ensemble.

"Jolly good of Sergeant Costello to give me a chit to you," he told de Grandin as the little Frenchman came into the study and eyed him with cold hatred. "I'm sure I don't know where I could have looked for help if he'd not thought of you."

De Grandin's frigid manner showed no sign of thawing. "What can I do for you, *Monsieur le Capitaine*—or is it *lieutenant?"* he asked.

The caller gave a start. "You know me?" he demanded.

"I have never had the pleasure of beholding you before," the Frenchman answered. His tone implied he was not anxious to prolong the scrutiny.

"But you knew I was in the service?"

"Naturally. You are obviously English and a gentleman. You were at least eighteen in 1914. That assures one you were in the war. Your complexion shows you have resided in the tropics, which might mean either India or Africa, but you called the sergeant's note a chit, which means you've spent some time in India. Now, if you will kindly state your business——" he paused with raised eyebrows.

"It's a funny, mixed-up sort o' thing," the other answered. "You're right in saying that I've been in India; I was out there almost twenty years. Chucked it up and went to farmin'; then a cousin died here in the province of New Jersey, leavin' me a mass o' rock and rubble and about two hundred thousand pounds, to boot."

The look of long-enduring patience deepened on de Grandin's features. "And what is one to do?" he rejoined wearily. "Help you find a buyer for the land? You will be going back to England with the cash, of course."

The caller's tanned complexion deep-

"A line of flame was rising, flickering and dancing."

ened with a flush, but he ignored the studied insult of the question. "No such luck. I'd not be takin' up your time if things were simple as that. What I need is someone to help me duck the family curse until I can comply with the will's terms. He was a queer blighter, this American cousin of mine. His great-grandfather came out to the provinces—the States, I should say—without so much as a pot to drink his beer from or a window he could toss it out of; cadet of the family, and all that, you know. He must have prospered, though, for when he burned to death he left half the bally county to his heirs at law, and provided in his will that whoever took the estate must live at least twelve months in the old mansion house. Sort o' period of probation, you see. No member of the family can get a penny of the cash till he's finished out his year of residence. I fancy the old duffer got the wind up at the last and was bound he'd show the heathens that their blighted curse was all a lot of silly rot."

De Grandin's air of cold hostility had been moderating steadily. As the caller finished speaking he leant forward with a smile. "You have spoken of a family curse, *Monsieur;* just what is it, if you please?"

An embarrassed look came in the other's face. "Don't think that I'm an utter ass," he begged. "I know it sounds a bit thick when you put it into words, but—well, the thing *has* seemed to work, and I'd rather not take chances. All right for me, of course; but there's Avis and the little chap to think of.

"Old Albert Pemberton, my great-grandfather's brother and the founder of the family in America, left two sons, John and Albert, junior. They were willing enough to pass their year of residence, but neither of 'em finished it. John left two sons, and they died trying to live out the year at Foxcroft. So did their two sisters, and their husbands. The chap I take it from was the younger daughter's son, and not born on the property. There's never been a birth in the old manor house, though there have been twelve sudden deaths there; for every legatee attempting to observe the dictates of old Albert's will has died. Yet each generation has passed the estate down with the same proviso for a year's residence as condition precedent to inheritance. Seems as if they're all determined to defy the curse——"

"*Mille tourments,* this everlasting curse; what is this seven times accursèd curse of which you speak so glibly and tell us absolutely nothing?"

For answer Pemberton reached in his jacket and produced a locket. It was made of gold, slightly larger than an old-time watch, and set with rows of seed-pearls round the edge. Snapping it open, he disclosed two portraits painted with minute detail on ivory plaques. One was of a young man in a tightly-buttoned jacket of white cloth, high-collared, gilt-braided, with insignia of some military rank upon the shoulders. Upon his head he wore a military cap shaped something like the képi which the French wore in Algeria about the middle of the Nineteenth Century, hooded in a linen sheath which terminated in a neck-cloth trailing down between his shoulders. Despite the mustache and long sideburns the face was youthful; the man could not have been much more than three and twenty.

"That's Albert Pemberton," our visitor announced. "And that's his wife Maria, or, as she was originally known, Sarastai."

"*Parbleu!*"

"Quite so. Lovely, wasn't she?"

She was, indeed. Her hair, so black it seemed to have the blue lights of a

cockerel's ruff within its depths, was smoothly parted in the middle and brought down each side her face across the small and low-set ears, framing an oleander-white forehead. Her wide-spaced, large, dark eyes and her full-lipped mouth were exquisite. Her nose was small and straight, with fine-cut nostrils; her chin, inclined to pointedness, was cleft across the middle by a dimple. Brows of almost startling black curved in circumflexes over her fine eyes in the "flying gull" formation so much prized by beauty connoisseurs of the early eighteen hundreds. Pearl-set pendants dangled from her ear-lobes nearly to the creamy shoulders which her low-necked gown exposed. One hand was laid upon her bosom, and the fingers were so fine and tapering that they seemed almost transparent, and were tipped by narrow, pointed nails almost as red as strawberries. She was younger than her husband by some three or four years, and her youthful look was heightened by the half-afraid, half-pleading glance that lay in her dark eyes.

"Que c'est belle; que c'est jeune!" de Grandin breathed. "And it was through her——"

Our caller started forward in his chair. "Yes! How'd you guess it?"

I looked at them in wonder. That they understood each other perfectly was obvious, but what it was they were agreed on I could not imagine.

De Grandin chuckled as he noticed my bewilderment. "Tell him, *mon ami,*" he bade the Englishman. "He cannot understand how one so lovely—*morbleu,* my friend," he turned to me, "I bet myself five francs you do not more than half suspect the lady's nationality!"

"Of course I do," I answered shortly. "She's English. Anyone can see that much. She was Mrs. Pemberton, and ——"

"Non, non," he answered with a laugh, "that is the beauty of the tropics which we see upon her face. She was—correct me if I err, *Monsieur"*—he bowed to Pemberton—"she was an Indian lady, and, unless I miss my guess, a high-caste Hindoo, one of those in whom the blood of Alexander's conquering Greeks ran almost undefiled. *N'est-ce-pas?"*

"Correct!" our visitor agreed. "My great-great-uncle met her just before the Mutiny, in 1856. It was through her that he came here, and through her that the curse began, according to the family legend."

Lights were playing in de Grandin's eyes, little flashes like heat-lightning flickering in a summer sky, as he bent and tapped our caller on the knee with an imperative forefinger. "At the beginning, if you please, *Monsieur,"* he bade. "Start at the beginning and relate the tale. It may help to guide us when we come to formulate our strategy. This Monsieur Albert Pemberton met his lady while he served with the East India Company in the days before the Sepoy Mutiny. How was it that he met her, and where did it occur?"

PEMBERTON smiled quizzically as he lighted the cigar the Frenchman proffered. "I have it from his journal," he replied. "They were great diarists, those old boys, and my uncle rated a double first when it came to setting down the happenings of the day with photographic detail. In the fall of '56 he was scouting up Bithoor way with a detail of North Country *sowars*—mounted troops, you know—henna-bearded, swaggering followers of the Prophet who would cheerfully have slit every Hindoo throat between the Himalayas and the Bay of Bengal. They made temporary camp for tiffin in a patch of wooded land, and the

fires had just been lighted underneath the troopers' cook-pots when there came a sort of ominous murmur from the roadway which wound past the woodland toward the river and the burning-ghats beyond. Little flickers of the flame that was about to burst into a holocaust next year were already beginning to show, and my uncle thought it best to take no chances; so he sent a file of troopers with a *subadar* to see what it was all about. In ten or fifteen minutes they came back, swearing such oaths as only Afghan Mussulmans can use when speaking of despised Hindoos.

" '*Wah*, it is a burning, Captain *Sahib*,' the *subadar* reported. 'The Infidels—may Allah make their faces black! — drag forth a widow to be burnt upon her husband's funeral pyre.'

"Now the British Raj forbade suttee in 1829, and made those taking any part in it accessories to murder. Technically, therefore, my uncle's duty was to stop the show, but he had but twenty *sowars* in his detail, and the Hindoos probably would number hundreds. He was, as you Americans say, in a decided spot. If he interfered with the religious rite, even though the law forbade it, he'd have a first-class riot on his hands, and probably lose half of his command, if the whole detail weren't massacred. Besides, his orders were to scout and bring reports in to the Residency, and he'd not be able to perform his mission if he lost too many men, or was killed in putting down a riot. On the other hand, here was a crime in process of commission under his immediate observation, and his duty was to stop it, so——"

"*Morbleu*, one understands!" de Grandin chuckled. "He was, as one might say, between the devil and the ocean. What did he do, this amiable ancestor of yours, *Monsieur?* One moment, if you please——" he raised his hand to shut off Pemberton's reply. "I make the wager with myself. I bet me twenty francs I know the answer to his conduct ere you tell it. *Bon*, the wager is recorded. Now, if you please, proceed."

A boyish grin was on the Briton's face as he replied: "It was a tight fix to be in, but I think the old boy used his head, at that. First of all, he bundled his dispatches in a packet and told a *sowar* off to take them to the Residency. It was no child's-play to select a messenger, for every man in his command itched to sink a saber-blade in Hindoo flesh; so finally they compromised by drawing lots. They're a bunch of fatalistic johnnies, those Mohammedans, and the chap who drew the short straw said it was the will of Allah that he be denied the pleasure of engaging in the shindy, and rode away without another murmur. Then my uncle told the men to stand to arms while he left them with the *subadar* and took two others to go scouting with him.

"At the forest edge they saw the Hindoos coming, and it must have been a sight, according to his diary. They were raising merry hell with drums and cymbals and tom-toms, singing and wailing and shrieking as if their luncheon disagreed with them. In the van came Brahmin priests, all decked out in robes of state and marching like a squad of sergeants major on parade. Then came a crowd of *gurus*—they're holy men, you know, and my uncle knew at once that these were specially holy; for whereas the average fakir shows enough bare hide to let you guess at his complexion, these fellows were so smeared with filth and ashes that you couldn't tell if they were black or white, and you could smell 'em half a mile away if you happened to get down-wind of 'em. They were jumpin' and contortin' round a four-wheeled cart to which a span of bullocks had been harnessed, and in which stood a ten-foot

image of the goddess Kali, who's supposed to manifest the principles of love and death. If you've ever seen those idols you know what this one looked like —black as sin and smeared with goat's blood, four arms branchin' from its shoulders, tongue hangin' out and all a-wash with betel-juice and henna. There's a collar o' skulls strung round its neck and a belt of human hands tied round its waist. Not an appetizin' sight at any time, when it's plastered thick with half-dried blood and rancid butter it's enough to make a feller gag.

"Followin' the Kali-cart was another crowd o' Brahmins, all dressed up for a party, and in their midst they dragged—for she could scarcely walk—a girl as white as you or I."

"A white woman, you say?" I interrupted.

"You ought to know, you've just looked at her picture," answered Pemberton, raising the locket from his knee and holding out the sweet, pale face for my inspection. "That was my Aunt Maria—or Sarastai, as she was then.

"I suppose she must have looked a little different in her native dress, but I'll wager she was no less beautiful. My uncle's diary records that she was fairly loaded down with jewels. Everywhere a gem could find a resting-place had been devoted to her decoration. There was a diadem of pearls and rubies on her head; a 'golden flower,' or fan-like ornament of filigree in which small emeralds and seed-pearls were set, had been hung in her nose, and dropped so low across her lips that he could hardly see her mouth. Her ears and neck and shoulders and arms and wrists and ankles and every toe and finger bore some sort of jewel, and her gold-embroidered *sari* was sewn about the border with more gems, and even her white-muslin veil was edged with seed-pearls.

"Two Brahmins held her elbows, half leading and half dragging her along, and her head swayed drunkenly, now forward on her breast, now falling to one shoulder or the other as she lurched and staggered on the road.

"Last of all there marched a company of men with simitars and pistols and a few long-barreled muskets. In their midst they bore a bier on which a corpse lay in full-dress regalia, pearl-embroidered turban, robe of woven silk and gold, waist-shawl set with diamonds. From the richness of the widow's jewels and the magnificent accouterments the corpse displayed, as well as by the size of the escort, my uncle knew the dead man was of great importance in the neighborhood; certainly a wealthy landlord, probably an influential nobleman or even petty prince."

"POOR child!" I murmured. "No wonder she was frightened to the point of fainting. To be burned alive——"

"It wasn't terror, sir," said Pemberton. "You see, to be *sati*, that is, to offer oneself as a voluntary sacrifice upon the funeral pyre, was considered not only the most pious act a widow could perform, it enhanced her husband's standing in the future world. Indian women of that day —and even nowadays—had that drilled into them from infancy, but sometimes the flesh is weaker than the spirit. In Sarastai's case her husband was an old man, so old that she had never been his wife in anything but name, and when he died she flinched at the decree that she must burn herself upon his funeral pyre. To have a widow backslide, especially the widow of such an influential man as he had been, would have cast dishonor on the family and brought undying scandal to the neighborhood; so they filled her up with opium and *gunjah*, put her best clothes on her and marched her

to the burning-ghat half conscious and all but paralyzed with drugs——"

"Ah, yes, one comprehends completely," broke in Jules de Grandin. "But your uncle, what of him? What did he then do?"

"You can't use cavalry in wooded terrain, and the forest came down thick each side the road. Besides, my uncle had but two men with him, and to attempt a sortie would have meant sure death. Accordingly he waited till the procession filed past, then hurried back to his command and led them toward the burning-ghat. This lay in a depression by the river bank, so that the partly burned corpses could be conveniently thrown into the stream when cremation rites were finished. The Hindoos had a quarter-hour start, but that was just as well, as they took more time than that to make their preparations. The funeral pyre had been erected, and over it they poured a quantity of sandal-oil and melted butter. Paraffin was not so common in the Orient those days.

"When all had been prepared they took the dead man's costly garments off and stripped the widow of her jewels and gorgeous *sari,* wrapping each of them in plain white cotton cloth like winding-sheets and pouring rancid butter over them. They laid the corpse upon the pyre and marched the widow seven times around it with a lighted torch held in her hand. Then they lifted her up to the pyre, for the poor kid still was only semi-conscious, made her squat cross-legged, and laid the dead man's head upon her knees. A Brahmin gave the signal and the dead man's eldest son ran forward with a torch to set the oil-soaked wood afire, when my uncle rode out from the woods and ordered them to halt. He spoke Hindustani fluently, and there was no mistaking what he said when he told them that the Raj had banned suttee and commanded them to take the widow down.

"The thing the blighters didn't know was that nineteen Afghan cavalrymen were waiting in the underbrush, praying as hard as pious men could pray that the Hindoos would refuse to heed my uncle's orders.

"Allah heard their prayers, for the only answer that the Brahmins gave was a chorus of shrill curses and a barrage of stones and cow-dung. The dead man's son ran forward to complete the rite, but before he could apply the torch my uncle drew his pistol and shot him very neatly through the head.

"Then all hell broke loose. The guard of honor brought their muskets into play and fired a volley, wounding several of the crowd and cutting branches from the trees behind my uncle. But when they drew their swords and rushed at him it was no laughing-matter, for there must have been two hundred of them, and those fellows are mean hands with the bare steel.

" 'Troop advance! Draw sabers! Trot, gallop, charge!' When the natives heard my uncle's order they halted momentarily, and it would have been a lot more healthy if they'd turned and run, for before they could say 'knife' the Afghans were among 'em, and the fat was in the fire.

" '*Yah Allah, Allah—Allah!*' cried the *subadar,* and his men gave tongue to the pack-cry that men of the North Country have used when hunting lowland Hindoos since the days when Moslem missionaries first converted Afghanistan.

"There were only nineteen of them, and my uncle, while the Hindoos must have totaled half a thousand, but"—the pride an honest man takes in his trade shone in his eyes as Pemberton grinned at us—"you don't need more than twenty professional soldiers to scatter a mob of

scum like that any more than you need even numbers when you set the beagles on a flock of rabbits!"

"À merveille!" de Grandin cried. "I knew that I should win my bet. Before you told us of your uncle's actions you recall I made a wager with myself? *Bien.* I bet me that he would not let that lot of monkey-faces commit murder. *Très bon.* Jules de Grandin, pay me what you owe!" Solemnly he extracted a dollar from his trouser pocket, passed it from his right hand to his left, and stowed it in his waistcoat. "And now—the curse?" he prompted.

"Quite so, the curse. They took Sarastai from the funeral pyre and carried her to safety at the station, but before they went a *guru* put a curse on all of them. None should die in bed, he swore. Moreover, none of them should ever take inheritance of land or goods till kinsman had shed kinsman's blood upon the land to be inherited.

"And the maledictions seemed to work," he ended gloomily. "My Uncle Albert married Sarastai shortly after he had rescued her, and though she was as beautiful as any English girl, he found that he was ostracized, and had to give up his commission. English folk were no more cordial when he brought his 'tar-brush' bride back home to Surrey. So he emigrated to the States, fought the full four years of your great Civil War, and founded what has since become one of the largest fortunes in New Jersey. Still, see the toll the thing has taken. Not one of Albert Pemberton's descendants has long enjoyed the estate which he built, and death by fire has come to all his heirs. Looks as if I'm next in line."

De Grandin looked at him with narrowed eyes. "Death by fire, *Monsieur?"*

"Quite. Foxcroft's been burned down eight times, and every time it burned one or more of Albert Pemberton's descendants died. The first fire killed old Albert and his wife; the second took his eldest son, and——"

"One would think rebuilding with materials impervious to fire would have occurred to them——"

"HA!" OUR visitor's short laugh was far from mirthful. "It did, sir. In 1900 Robert Pemberton rebuilt Foxcroft of stone, with cement walls and floors. He was sitting in his libr'y alone at night when the curse took him. No fire was burning on the hearth, for it was early summer, but somehow the hearth-rug got afire and the flames spread to the armchair where he dozed. They found him, burned almost to a crisp, next morning. Cyril Pemberton, from whom I take the estate, died in his motorcar three months ago. The thing caught fire just as he drove in the garage, and he fried like an eel before he could so much as turn the handle of the door.

"See here, Doctor de Grandin, you've just got to help me. When little Jim was born I resigned from the army so I could be with Avis and the kid. I bought a little farm in Hampshire and had settled down to be a country gentleman of sorts when Cyril died and news of this inheritance came. I sold the farm off at a loss to raise funds to come here. If I fail to meet the will's provisions and complete the twelve months' residence I'm ruined, utterly. You see the fix I'm in?"

"Completely," Jules de Grandin nodded. "Is there any other of your family who could claim this estate?"

"H'm. Yes, there is. I've a distant cousin named John Ritter who might be next in line. We were at Harrow together. Jolly rotten chap he was, too. Sent down from Oxford when they caught him cheatin' in a game o' cards, fired out o' the Indian Civil Administration for a lack of recognition of *meum*

et tuum where other fellows' wives were concerned. Now, if Avis and I don't make good and live in this old rookery for a full twelve months, we forfeit our succession and the whole estate goes to this bounder. Not that he could make much use of it, but——"

"How so? Is he uninterested in money?"

"Oh, he's interested enough, but he's in jail."

"Hein? In durance?"

"Quite. In a Bombay jail, doin' a life stretch for killin' an outraged husband in a brawl. Jolly lucky he was that the jury didn't bring him in guilty of wilful murder, too."

"One sees. And how long have you resided at Foxcroft?"

"Just six weeks, sir, and some dam' queer things have taken place already."

"By example——"

"Our first night there the bedroom furniture caught fire. My wife and I were sound asleep, dog-tired from gettin' things in shape, and neither of us would have smelled the smoke until it was too late, but Laird, my Scottish terrier, was sleepin' by the bed, and he raised such a row he woke us up. Queer thing about it, too. There was no fire laid in the room, and neither Avis nor I'd been smokin', but the bedclothes caught fire, just the same, and we didn't have a second's spare time standin' clear. Two days later Laird died. Some stinkin' blighter poisoned him.

"The second week I was ridin' out from the village with some supplies when something whizzed past my head, almost cuttin' the tip o' my nose off. When I dismounted for a look around I found a knife-blade almost buried in a tree beside the road.

"We'd stocked the place with poultry, so that we could have fresh eggs, and every bloomin' chicken died. We can't keep a fowl in the hen-house overnight.

"Not only that; we've heard the damn'dest noises round the house—things crashing through the underbrush, bangings at the doors and windows, and the most infernal laughter from the woods at dead of night. It's got us nervy as a lot o' cats, sir.

"My wife and I both want to stick it, as much from principle as for the money, but Annie, Avis' old nurse, not to mention Appleby, my batman, are all for chuckin' the whole business. They're sure the curse is workin'."

De Grandin eyed him thoughtfully. "Your case has interest, Monsieur Pemberton," he said at last. "If it is convenient, Doctor Trowbridge and I will come to Foxcroft tomorrow afternoon."

We shook hands at the front door. "See you tomorrow afternoon," I promised as our caller turned away, "if anything——"

W'hir-r-r-rr! Something flashing silver-gray beneath the street lamp's light came hurtling past my head, and a dull thud sounded as the missile struck the panel of the door.

"Ha, scélérat, coquin, assassin!" cried de Grandin, rushing out into the darkened street. "I have you!"

But he was mistaken. The sound of flying footsteps pounding down the street and vanishing around the corner was the sole clue to the mystery.

BREATHING hard with rage as much as from exertion, he returned and wrenched the missile from my scarred front door. It was the blade of a cheap iron knife, such as may be bought at any ten-cent store, its point and edges ground to razor sharpness, its wooden helve removed and the blade-heel weighted with ten ounces of crude lead, roughly welded on.

"Ah-ha!" the little Frenchman mur-

mured as he balanced the crude weapon in his palm. *"Ah-ha-ha!* One begins to understand. Tell me, *Monsieur,* was the other knife thrown at you like this one?"

"Yes, sir, just exactly!" gasped the Englishman.

"One sees, one comprehends; one understands. You may be out of India, my friend, but you are not away from it."

"What d'ye mean?"

"Me, I have seen the knife-blade weighted in this manner for assassination, but only in one place."

"Where?" asked Pemberton and I in chorus.

"In the interior of Burma. This weapon is as much like those used by *dakaits* of Upper Burma as one pea is like another in the pod. Tell me, *Monsieur le Capitaine,* did you ever come to grips with them in India?"

"No, sir," Pemberton replied. "All my service was in the South. I never got over into Burma."

"And you never had a quarrel with Indian priests or fakirs?"

"Positive. Fact is, I always rather liked the beggars and got on with 'em first rate."

"This adds the *moutarde piquante* to our dish. The coincidence of strange deaths you relate might be the workings of a fakir's curse; this knife is wholly physical, and very deadly. It would seem we are attacked on two sides, by superphysical assailants operating through the thought-waves of that old one's maledictions, and by some others who have reasons of their own for wishing you to be the center of attraction at a funeral. Good-night again, *Monsieur,* and a healthy journey home."

FOXCROFT lay among the mountains almost at the Pennsylvania border, and after consulting road maps we voted to go there by train. It was necessary to change cars at a small way station, and when the local finally came we found ourselves unable to get seats together. Fortunately for me there was a vacant place beside a window, and after stowing my duffle in the rack I settled down to read an interesting but not too plausible article on the use of tetraiodophenolphthalein in the diagnosis of diseases of the gall bladder.

Glancing up from my magazine once or twice while the baggage car was being filled, I noticed several young yokels, white and black, lounging on the station platform, and wondered idly why two young Negroes failed to join the laughing group. Instead, they seemed intent on something down the track, finally rose from the luggage truck on which they lounged and walked slowly toward the train. Beneath the window where I sat they paused a moment, and I noticed they were thin almost to emaciation, with skins of muddy brown rather than the chocolate of the Negro full-blood. Their hair, too, was straight as wire, and their eyes slate-gray rather than the usual brown of Africans.

"Odd-looking chaps," I mused as I resumed my reading.

Like most trains used in strictly local service, ours was composed of the railway's almost cast-off stock. Doors would not stay shut, windows would not open. Before we'd gone two miles the air within our coach was almost fetid. I rose and staggered up the swaying aisle to get a drink of water, only to find the tank was empty. After several unsuccessful efforts I succeeded in forcing back the door to the next coach and was inserting a cent in the cup-vending machine when a furious hissing forward told me someone had yanked the emergency cord. The train came to a bumping stop within its length, and I stumbled back to our coach to find de Grandin, a trainman and

several passengers gathered in a knot about the seat I had just vacated.

"This is *hideux,* my friend!" the little Frenchman whispered. "Observe him, if you please."

I looked, and turned sick at the sight. The big countryman who had shared the seat with me was slumped down on the green-plush covered bench, his throat so deeply gashed the head sagged horribly upon one shoulder. A spate of blood from a severed jugular smeared clothing, seat and floor. The window beside which I'd sat was smashed to slivers, and bits of broken glass lay all around.

"How—what——" I stammered, and for answer Jules de Grandin pointed to the floor. Midway in the aisle lay something that gleamed dully, the counterpart of the lead-weighted blade which had been thrown at Pemberton as he left my house the night before.

"Good heavens!" I exclaimed; "if I hadn't gone for water——"

"Mais oui," de Grandin interrupted. "For the first time in a long and useful life I find that I can say a word for water as a beverage. Undoubtlessly that knife was meant for you, my friend."

"But why?"

"Are you not a friend of Monsieur Pemberton's?"

"Of course, but——"

"No buts, Friend Trowbridge. Consider. There were two of those assassins at your house last night; at least I judge so from the noise they made in flight. You stood directly in the light from the hall lamp when we bid our guest goodnight; they must have made a note of your appearance. Apparently we have been under surveillance since then, and it is highly probable they heard us say that we would visit him today. *Voilà."*

We descended from the car and walked along the track. *"Regardez-vous!"* he ordered as we reached the window where I had been seated.

Upon the car-side was the crude outline of a grinning skull drawn in white crayon.

"Good Lord—those brown men at the station!" I jerked out. "They must have drawn this—it seemed to me they were not Negroes——"

"But no. But yes!" he nodded in agreement. "Indubitably they were not Africans, but Burmans. And very bad ones, too. This skull is the official signet of the goddess Kali, patron deity of *thags,* and the cult of *thaggee* makes its headquarters in Burma. It is useless to attempt to apprehend the thrower of the knife. By now he has had time to run half-way to Burma. But it behooves us to be careful how we step. We know not where to look for it, or when the blow will fall, but deadly peril walks with us from this time on. I do not think this task which we have undertaken is a very healthy one, my friend."

DRESSED in shabby Oxford bags and a khaki shooting-coat, Pemberton was waiting for us at the little railway station.

"Cheerio!" he greeted as we joined him. "All quiet on the jolly old Potomac, what?"

"Decidedly," de Grandin answered, then told him of the tragedy.

"By Jove!" our host exclaimed; "I'm shot if I don't feel like cutting the whole rotten business. Taking chances is all right for me, just part of the game, but to lug my wife into this hornets' nest——" he cranked the antiquated flivver standing by the platform, and we drove in moody silence through the groves of black-boughed, whispering pines that edged the roadway.

British genius for getting order out of chaos was evident as we arrived at Fox-

croft. The straggling lawn was neatly trimmed, the raffish privet hedge was clipped, on the small grass plot were several wicker chairs with brightly colored sailcloth cushions. A line of lush-green weeping willows formed a background for the weather-mellowed, ivy-covered house with its many gables, mullioned windows and projecting bays. As we chugged and wheezed between the tall posts of the gateless entranceway a young woman quit a gayly-colored canvas hammock and walked toward us, waving cheerful greeting.

"Don't say anything about what happened on the train, please," begged Pemberton as he brought the coughing motor to a halt.

Though definitely brunette, Avis Pemberton was just as definitely British. She had wide-spaced, slightly slanting hazel eyes, straight, dark hair smoothly parted in the middle and drawn low across her ears, a broad, white forehead, a small, straight nose set above a full-lipped, rather wide and humorous mouth, and a small and pointed chin marked with the faint suspicion of a cleft. When she smiled, two dimples showed low in her cheeks, making a merrily incongruous combination with her exotic eyes. She was dressed in a twin sweater combination, a kilted skirt of Harris tweed, Shetland socks and a pair of Scotch grain brogues which, clumsy as they were, could not disguise the slimness of her feet. Every line of her was long, fine-cut, and British as a breath of lavender.

"Hullo-hullo, old thing," her husband greeted. "Anything untoward occur while the good old bread-winner was off?"

"Nothing, lord and master," she answered smilingly as she acknowledged his quick introductions, but her hazel eyes were wide and thoughtful as the little Frenchman raised her fingers to his lips at presentation, and I thought I saw her cast a frightened glance across her shoulder as her husband turned to help us drag our duffle from the car.

Dinner was a rite at Foxcroft, as dinner always is with Britons. A flat bouquet of roses graced the table, four tall candles flickered in tall silver standards; the soup was cool and underseasoned, the joint of mutton tough and underdone, the burgundy a little sour, the apple tart a sadly soggy thing which might have made a billy-goat have nightmares. But Pemberton looked spick and span in dinner clothes and his wife was a misty vision in rose lace. Appleby, the "batman" who served Pemberton as servant through three army terms and quit the service to accompany him in civil life, served the meal with faultless technique, and brought us something he called coffee when the meal was over and we congregated on the lawn beneath a spreading poplar tree. De Grandin's air of gloom grew deeper by the minute. When the servant tendered him a Sèvres cup filled with the off-brown, faintly steaming mixture, I thought he would assault him. Instead, he managed something like a smile as he turned to our hostess.

"I have heard Monsieur Pemberton speak of your son, *Madame;* is he with you in America?" he asked.

"Oh, dear, no; he's with my father at Lerwick-on-Tyne. You see, we didn't know just what conditions here might be, and thought that he'd be safer at the vicarage."

"Your father is a churchman, then?"

"Very much so. It was not till after we had Little Jim that he managed to forgive me; even now I'm not quite sure that he regards me as a proper person to have custody of a small boy."

"*Madame,* I am confused. How is it you say——"

The girl laughed merrily. "Father's

terribly low church and mid-Victorian. He classes foreigners and Anglo-Catholics, heathens, actors and Theosophists together. When I joined a troupe of unit dancers at the Palace he said public prayers for me; when I went out to the colonies to dance he disowned me as a vagabond. I met Big Jim while dancing in Bombay, and when I wrote I'd married him the only answer Father sent was a note congratulating me on having found an officer and gentleman to make an honest woman of me. I almost died when Little Jim was born, and the doctors said I could not stand the Indian climate, so Big Jim gave up his commission and we all went back to England. Father wouldn't see us for almost a year, but when we finally took our baby to him for baptism he capitulated utterly. He's really an old dear, when you penetrate his shell, but if he ever saw me do an Indian dance——"

"You'd have to start from scratch again, old thing," her husband chuckled as he lit his pipe.

"She used to sneak off every chance she got and take instructions from the native dancers. Got so perfect in the technique that if she'd been a little darker-skinned she could have passed in any temple as a *deva-dasi*—by Jove, I say!" He looked at her as though he saw her for the first time.

"What is it, Jim?"

"I say, you know, I never noticed it before, but there's a look about you like Sarastai. Fine and beautiful, and all that sort of——"

"Oh, Jim darling, stop it! Anyone would think—what's that?"

" 'elp, 'elp, somebody — 'elp!" the shriek came from the house behind us, each quavering syllable raw-edged with terror.

WE RUSHED around the angle of the building, through the neatly planted kitchen garden and up the three low steps that reached the kitchen door.

"What is it—who is here?" cried de Grandin as we paused upon the big room's threshold.

In the corner farthest from the door crouched an aged woman, or perhaps I should have said a creature with a woman's body, but a face like nothing human. Seamed and lined with countless wrinkles, yellowed teeth bared in a senseless grin, she squatted by an open casement, elbows stiffly bent, hands hanging loosely, as a begging terrier might hold its paws, and mouthed and gibbered at us as we stared.

"Good God!" our host ejaculated. "Annie——"

"Annie! Oh, my poor dear Annie!" cried our hostess as she rushed across the lamplit kitchen and threw her arms around the human caricature crouching in the angle of the wall. "What's wrong with her?" she called across her shoulder as she hugged the mouthing crone against her bosom. "What's—O God, she's *mad!*"

The woman cringed away from the encircling arms. "You won't 'urt ole Annie, will 'ee?" she whimpered. "You won't let the black man get 'er? See"—she bared a skinny forearm—" 'e 'urt me! 'e 'urt me with a shiny thing!"

De Grandin drew his breath in sharply as he examined the tiny wound which showed against the woman's wrinkled skin. "Up to the elbow, *mes amis,*" he told us solemnly. "We have stepped in it up to the elbow. Me, I know this mark. But yes, I have seen him before. The devotees of Kali sometimes shoot a serum in a victim's arm with such results. I know not what this serum is—and probably no white man does—but the Indian police know it. 'Whom the gods destroy

they first make mad' is no idle proverb with the *thags* of Burma. *Non.* There is no antidote for it. This poor one will be gone by morning. Meantime"—he put his hands beneath the woman's arms and raised her—"she might as well die in bed in Christian fashion. Will you lead us to her room, Friend Pemberton?"

De Grandin on one side, I on the other, we half led, half carried the chuckling, weeping crone along the passageway. A gust of wind swung the long casement open and I crossed to close it. From the night outside where thickly growing rhododendron shut the moonlight out there came a laugh like that the fiends of hell might give at the arrival of a new consignment of lost souls. *"Ha-ha!—ha-ha-ha!—ha-ha!"*

"Sacré nom, I'll make you laugh upon the other side of your misshapen face!" de Grandin cried, dropping the old woman's arm and rushing to the window where he leant across the sill and poured the contents of his automatic pistol at the shadows whence the ghostly laughter came.

A crash of twigs and the flapping-back of displaced branches answered, and from the further distance came an echo of the wild, malignant cachinnation: *"Ha-ha!—ha-ha-ha!—ha-ha!"*

"And now, my friends, it is for us to formulate our strategy," de Grandin told us as we finished breakfast. "From the things which we have seen and heard I'd say we are beset by human and subhuman agencies; possibly working independently, more probably in concert. First of all I must go to the village to make some purchases and notify the coroner of your late lamented servant's death. I shall return, but"—he cast the phantom of a wink at me—"not for luncheon."

He was back a little after noon with a large, impressive bundle which clanked mysteriously each time he shifted it. When the papers were removed he showed a set of heavy padlocks, each complete with hasp and staple. Together we went round the big house, fixing locks at doors and windows, testing fastenings repeatedly; finally, when our task was done, repairing to the lawn where Appleby awaited us with a teacart-load of toasted muffins, strawberry preserve and steaming oolong.

"What was in that old beer bottle that you stood beside the bed?" I asked. "It looked like ordinary water."

"Water, yes," he answered with a grin, "but not ordinary, I assure you. I have the—what you call him?—hunch?—my friend. Tonight, perhaps tomorrow, we shall have use for what I brought out from the village."

"But what——"

"Hullo, there, ready for a spot of tea?" called Pemberton. "I'm famished, and the little woman's just about to haul her colors down."

"You are distrait, *Madame?"* de Grandin asked, dropping into a willow chair and casting a suspicious glance upon the tray of muffins Appleby extended.

"Indeed, I am. I've been feeling devils all day long." She smiled at him a little wearily above her teacup rim. "Something's seemed to boil up in me—it's the queerest thing, but I've had an urge to dance, an almost irresistible impulse to put an Indian costume on and do the *Bramara*—the Bee-dance. I know it's dreadful to feel so, with poor old Annie's body lying by the wall and this menace hanging over us, but something seems to urge me almost past resistance to put my costume on and dance——"

"Tiens, Madame, one comprehends," he smiled agreement. "I, too, have felt these so queer urges. *Regardez, s'il vous plaît:* We are beset by mental stress, we

look about us for escape and there seems none; then suddenly from somewhere comes an urge unbidden. Perhaps it is to take a drink of tea; maybe we feel impelled to walk out in the rain; quite possibly the urge comes to sit down and strum at the piano, or, as in your case, to dance. Reason is a makeshift thing, at best. We have used it but a scant half-million years; our instincts reach back to the days when we crawled in primeval ooze. Trust instinct, *Madame*. Something boils within you, you declare? *Très bien*. It is your ego seeking liberation. Permit the boiling to continue; then, when the effete matter rises to the top, we skim him off"—with his hand he made a gesture as of scooping something up—"and throw him out. *Voilà*. We have got rid of that which worries us!"

"You think I should give way to it?"

"But certainly, of course; why not? This evening after dinner, if you still have the urge to dance, we shall delight to watch you and applaud your art."

TEA finished, Appleby, de Grandin and I set out on a reconnaissance. We walked across the grass plot to the copse of evergreens from which the weird laughter came the night before and searched the ground on hands and knees. Our search was fruitless, for pine needles lay so thick upon the ground that nothing like a footprint could be found.

Behind the house stood barn and hencoops, the latter empty, Pemberton's archaic flivver and two saddle-horses tenanting the former. "It's queer the place should be so much run down, considering the family's wealth," I murmured as we neared the stable.

"The former howner was a most hexcentric man, sir," Appleby supplied. "'e never seemed to care about the plyce, and didn't live 'ere hany more than necess'ry. Hi've 'eard 'e honly used hit as a sort o'—my Gawd, wot's that?" He pointed to a little mound of earth beside the barn foundation.

De Grandin took a step or two in the direction of the little hillock, then paused, his small nose wrinkled in disgust. "It has the perfume of corruption," he remarked.

"W'y, hit's pore hold Laird, the master's dawg, sir," Appleby returned excitedly. "Who's done this thing to 'im? Hi dug 'is gryve meself, sir, w'en we found 'im dead, hand Hi took partic'lar pynes to myke hit deep hand strong. 'eaped a thumpin' boulder hon 'im, sir, Hi did, but now——"

"One sees, and smells," de Grandin interrupted. "He has been resurrected, but not restored to life."

The cockney leant above the violated grave to push the earth back in. "Picked clean 'e is, sir," he reported. "'e couldn't be no cleaner hif a stinkin' buzzard 'ad been hat 'im."

The little Frenchman tweaked the needle points of his wheat-blond mustache between a thoughtful thumb and forefinger. "It is possible—quite probable," he murmured. "They have imported every other sort of devilment; why not this one?"

"What?" I demanded. "Who's imported what——"

"*Zut!* We have work to do, my friend. Do you begin here at this spot and walk in ever-widening circles. Eventually, unless I miss my guess, you will come upon the tracks of a large dog. When you have found them, call me, if you please."

I followed his instructions while he and Appleby walked toward the house.

In fifteen or twenty minutes I reached a patch of soft earth where pine needles did not lie too thick to cover tracks, and there, plain as the cannibals' mark on the sands of Crusoe's island, showed the paw-print of a giant dog.

"Hullo, de Grandin!" I began. "I've found——"

A crashing in the undergrowth near by cut short my hail, and I drew the pistol which de Grandin had insisted that I carry as the thing or person neared me.

The rhododendron branches parted as a pair of groping hands thrust forth, and Appleby came staggering out. "Th' black 'un, sir," he gasped in a hoarse voice. "Hi passed 'im 'fore I knew it, sir, then seen 'is turban shinin' hin th' leaves. I myde to shoot 'im, but 'e stuck me with a forked stick. Hi'm a-dyin', sir, a-dy——"

He dropped upon the grass, the fatal word half uttered, made one or two convulsive efforts to regain his feet, then slumped down on his face.

"De Grandin!" I called frenziedly. "I say, de Grandin——"

He was beside me almost as I finished calling, and together we cut the poor chap's trouser leg away, disclosing two small parallel pin-pricks in the calf of his left leg. A little spot of ecchymosis, like the bruise left by a blow, was round the wounds, and beyond it showed an area of swelled and reddened skin, almost like a scald. When de Grandin made a small incision with his knife in the bruised flesh, then pressed each side the wounds, the blood oozed thickly, almost like a semi-hardened gelatin.

"C'est fini," he pronounced as he rose and brushed his knees. "He did not have a chance, that poor one. This settles it."

"What settles what?"

"This, *parbleu!* If we needed further proof that we are menaced by a band of desperate *dakaits* we have it now. It is the mark and sign-manual of the criminal tribes of Burma. The man is dead of cobra venom—but these wounds were not made by a snake's fangs."

"BUT good heavens, man, if this keeps up there won't be one of us to tell the tale!" cried Pemberton as we completed ministering to Appleby's remains. "Twice they almost got me with their knives; they almost murdered Doctor Trowbridge; they've done for Annie and poor Appleby——"

"Exactement," de Grandin nodded. "But this will not keep up. Tonight, this very evening, we shall call their promontory—*non,* I mean their bluff. The coincidences of your kinsmen's deaths by fire, those might have been attributed to Hindoo curses; myself, I think they are; but these deliberate murders and attempts at murder are purely human doings. Your cousin, Monsieur Ritter——"

"Not an earthly!" Pemberton smiled grimly. "Did you ever see a British Indian jail? Not quite as easy to walk out of 'em as it is from an American prison——"

"Notwithstanding which, *Monsieur"* —the little Frenchman smiled sarcastically—"this Monsieur Ritter is at large, and probably within a gun-shot of us now. When I was in the village this forenoon I cabled the police at Bombay. The answer came within three hours:

John Ritter, serving a life term, escaped four months ago. His whereabouts unknown.

"You see? His jail-break almost coincided with the passing of your kinsman in America. He knew about the family curse, undoubtlessly, and determined to make profit by it. But he was practical, that one. *Mais oui.* He did not intend to wait the working of a curse which might be real or only fanciful. Not he, by blue! He bought the service of a crew of Burman cutthroats, and they came with all their bag of villain's tricks—their knives, their subtle poisons, even an hyena! That it was your servants and not you who met their deaths is not attribut-

able to any kindness on his part, but merely to good fortune. Your turns will come, unless——"

"Unless we hook it while we have the chance!"

"Unless you do exactly as I say," de Grandin finished without notice of the interruption. "In five minutes it will be ten o'clock. I suggest we seek our rooms, but not to sleep. You, *Monsieur,* and you, *Madame,* will see that both your doors and windows are securely fastened. Meantime, Doctor Trowbridge and I will repair to our chamber and—*eh bien,* I think we shall see things!"

DESPITE de Grandin's admonition, I fell fast asleep. How long I'd slept I do not know, nor do I recall what wakened me. There was no perceptible sound, but suddenly I was sitting bolt-upright, staring fascinated at our window's shadowed oblong. "Lucky thing we put those locks on," I reassured myself; "almost anything might——"

The words died on my tongue, and a prickling sensation traced my spine. What it was I did not know, but every sense seemed warning me of dreadful danger.

"De Grandin!" I whispered hoarsely. "De Grandin——"

I reached across the bed to waken him. My hand encountered nothing but the blanket. I was in that tomb-black room with nothing but my fears for company.

Slowly, scarcely faster than the hand that marks the minutes on the clock, the window-sash swung back. The heavy lock we'd stapled on was gone or broken. I heard the creak of rusty hinges, caught the faint rasp of a bar against the outer sill, and my breath went hot and sulfurous in my throat as a shadow scarcely darker than the outside night obscured the casement.

It was like some giant dog—a mastiff or great Dane—but taller, heavier, with a mane of unkempt hair about its neck. Pointed ears cocked forward, great eyes gleaming palely phosphorescent, it pressed against the slowly yielding window-frame. And now I caught the silhouette of its hog-snouted head against the window, saw its parted, sneering lips, smelled the retching stench that emanated from it, and went sick with horror. The thing was a hyena, a grave-robber, offal-eater, most loathsome of all animals.

Slowly, inch by cautious inch, it crept into the room, fangs bared in a snarl that held the horrible suggestion of a sneer. "Help, de Grandin—help!" I shrieked, leaping from the bed and dragging tangled blankets with me as a shield.

The hyena sprang. With a cry that was half growl, half obscene parody of a human chuckle, it launched itself through the intervening gloom, and next instant I was smothered underneath its weight as it worried savagely at the protecting blanket.

"*Sa-ha, Monsieur l'Hyène,* you seek a meal? Take this!" Close above me Jules de Grandin swung a heavy kukri knife as though it were a headsman's ax, striking through the wiry mane, driving deep into the brute's thick neck, almost decapitating it.

"Get up, my friend; arise," he ordered as he hauled me from beneath the bedclothes, already soaking with the foul beast's blood. "Me, I have squatted none too patiently behind the bed, waiting for the advent of that one. *Morbleu,* I thought that he would never come!"

"How'd you know about it——" I began, but he cut me short with a soft chuckle.

"The laughter in the bush that night, the small dog's ravished grave, finally the tracks you found today. They made the case complete. I made elaborate show of opening our window, and they must

have found the others fastened; so they determined to send their pet before them to prepare the way. He was savage, that one, but so am I, by blue! Come, let us tell our host and hostess of our visitor."

THE next day was a busy one. Sheriff's deputies and coroner's assistants came in almost ceaseless streams, questioning endlessly, making notes of everything, surveying the thicket where Appleby was killed and the kitchen where old Annie met her fate. At last the dreary routine ended, the mortician took away the bodies, and the Pembertons faced us solemn-eyed across the dinner table.

"I'm for chucking the whole rotten business," our host declared. "They've got two of us——"

"And we have one of them," supplied de Grandin. "Anon we shall have——"

"We're cutting out of here tomorrow," broke in Pemberton. "I'll go to selling cotton in the city, managing estates or clerking in a shop before I'll subject Avis to this peril one more day."

"C'est l'enfantillage!" declared de Grandin. "When success is almost in your hand you would retreat? *Fi donc, Monsieur!"*

"Fi donc or otherwise, we're going in the morning," Pemberton replied determinedly.

"Very well, let it be as you desire. Meantime, have you still the urge to dance, *Madame?"*

Avis Pemberton glanced up from her teacup with something like a guilty look. "More than ever," she returned so low that we could scarcely catch her words.

"Très bien. Since this will be our last night in the house, permit that we enjoy your artistry."

Her preparations were made quickly. We cleared a space in the big drawing-room, rolling back the rugs to bare the polished umber tiles of which the floor was made. Upon a chair she set a small hand-gramophone, needle ready poised, then hurried to her room to don her costume.

"Ecoutez, s'il vous plaît," de Grandin begged, tiptoeing from the drawing-room, returning in a moment with the water-filled beer bottle which he had brought from the village, the kukri knife with which he killed the hyena, and a pair of automatic pistols. One of these he pressed on me, the other on our host. "Have watchfulness, my friends," he bade in a low whisper. "When the music for the dance commences it is likely to attract an uninvited audience. Should anyone appear at either window, I beg you to shoot first and make inquiries afterward."

"Hadn't we better close the blinds?" I asked. "Because if we're likely to be watched——"

"Mais non," he negatived. "See, there is no light here save that the central lamp casts down, and that will shine directly on *Madame.* We shall be in shadow, but anyone who seeks to peer in through the window will be visible against the moonlight. You comprehend?"

"I'd like to have a final go at 'em," our host replied. "Even if I got only one, it'd help to even things for Appleby and Annie."

"I quite agree," de Grandin nodded. "Now—*s-s-sh;* silence. *Madame* comes!"

The chiming clink of ankle bells announced her advent, and as she crossed the threshold with a slow, sensuous walk, hips rolling, feet flat to floor, one set directly before the other, I leant forward in amazement. Never had I thought that change of costume could so change a personality. Yet there it was. In tweeds and Shetlands Avis Pemberton was British as a sunrise over Surrey, or a Christmas pageant Columbine; this sleekly

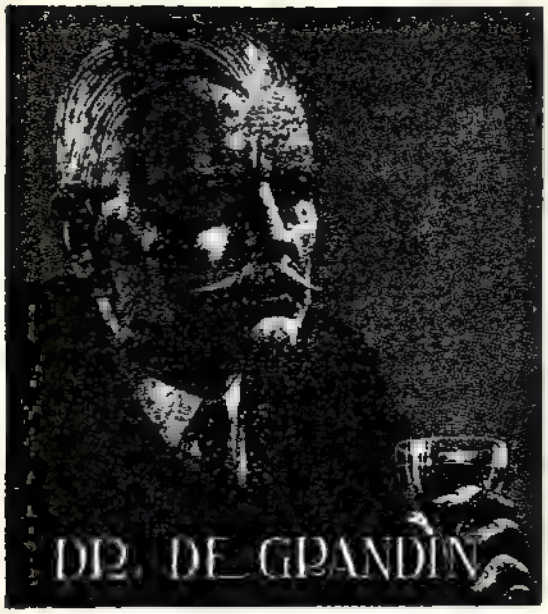
black-haired figure rippling past us with the grace of softly flowing water was a daughter of the gods, a temple *deva-dasi*, the mystery and allure and unfathomable riddle of the East incarnate. Her bodice was of saffron silk, sheer as net. Cut with short shoulder-sleeves and rounded neck it terminated just below her small, firm breasts and was edged with imitation emeralds and small opals which kindled into witch-fires in the lamplight's glow. From breast to waist her slim, firm form was bare, slender as an adolescent boy's, yet full enough to keep her ribs from showing in white lines against the creamy skin. A smalt-blue cincture had been tightly bound about her slender waist, emphasizing gently swelling hips and supporting a full, many-pleated skirt of cinnabar-red silken gauze. Across her smoothly parted blue-black hair was thrown a *sari* of deep blue with silver edging, falling down across one shoulder and caught coquettishly within the curve of a bent elbow. Silver bracelets hung with little hawk-bells bound her wrists; heavy bands of hammered silver with a fringe of silver tassels that flowed rippling to the floor and almost hid her feet were ringed about each ankle. Between her startlingly black brows there burned the bright vermilion of a caste mark.

PEMBERTON pressed the lever of the gramophone and a flood of liquid music flowed into the room. Deep, plaintive chords came from the guitar, the viols wept and crooned by turns, and the drums beat out an amatory rhythm. She paused a moment in the swing-lamp's golden disk of light, feet close together, knees straight, arms raised above her head, wrists interlaced, the right hand facing left, the left turned to the right, and each pressed to the other, palm to palm and finger against finger. The music quickened and she moved her feet in a swift, shuffling step, setting ankle bells a-chime, swaying like a palm tree in the rising breeze. She took the folds of her full skirt between joined thumbs and forefingers, daintily, as one might take a pinch of snuff, spread the gleaming, many-pleated tissue out fanwise, and advanced with a slow, gliding step. Her head bent sidewise, now toward this sleek shoulder, now toward that; then slowly it sank back, her long eyes almost closed, like those of one who falls into a swoon of unsupportable delight; her red lips parted, fell apart as though they had gone flaccid with satiety after ecstasy. Then she dropped forward in a deep salaam, head bent submissively, both hands upraised with thumbs and forefingers together.

I was about to beat my hands together in applause when de Grandin's grip upon my elbow halted me. *"Les flammes, mon ami, regardez-vous—les flammes!"* he whispered.

Across the vitric umber tiles that made the floor, a line of flame was rising, flickering and dancing, wavering, flaunting, advancing steadily, and I could smell the spicy-sweet aroma of burnt sandalwood. "It is the flame from that old, cheated funeral pyre," he breathed. "The vengeance-flame that burned the old one to a crisp while he lay in a fireproof room; the flame that set this house afire eight times; the flame of evil genius that pursues this family. See how easily I conquer it!"

With an agile leap he crossed the room, raised the bottle he had brought and spilled a splash of water on the crackling, leaping fire-tongues. It was as if a picture drawn in chalks were wiped away, or an image on a motion-picture screen obliterated as the light behind the film dies; for everywhere the drops of water fell, the flames died into blackness with a sullen, scolding hiss.



Back and forth across the line of fire he hurried, throwing water on the fluttering, dazzling flares till all were dead and cold.

"The window, *mes amis,* look to the window! Shoot if you see faces!" he ordered as he fought the dying fire.

Both Pemberton and I looked up as he called out, and I felt a sudden tightening in my throat as my eyes came level with the window. Framed in the panes were three faces, two malignant, brown and scowling, one a sun-burned white, but no less savage. The dark men I remembered instantly. It was they who stood beside the train the day the knife was thrown to kill the man who shared the seat with me. But the frowning, cursing white man was a stranger.

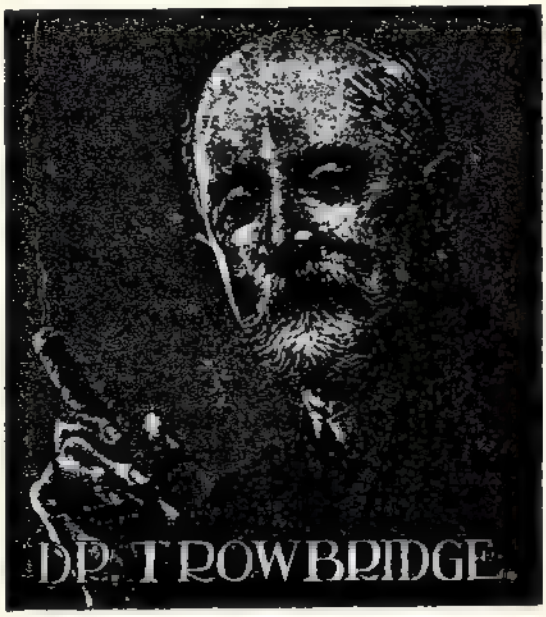
Even as I looked I saw one of the brown men draw his hand back and caught the glimmer of a poised knife-blade. I raised my pistol and squeezed hard upon the trigger, but the mechanism jammed, and I realized the knife-man had me at his mercy.

But Pemberton's small weapon answered to his pressure, and the stream of bullets crashed against the glass, sent it shattering in fragments, and bored straight through the scowling countenances, making little sharp-edged pits in them like those a stream of sprinkled water makes when turned upon damp clay, except that where these little pock-marks showed there spread a smear of crimson.

There was something almost comic in the look of pained surprize the faces showed as the storm of bullets swept across them. Almost, it seemed to me, they voiced a protest at an unexpected trick; as though they'd come to witness an amusing spectacle, only to discover that the joke was turned on them, and they had no relish for the rôle of victim.

"YES, it's Ritter, all right," Pemberton pronounced as we turned the bodies over in the light of an electric torch. "Of course, he was a filthy rotter and all that, but—hang it all, it's tough to know you have a kinsman's blood upon your hands, even if——"

"Parbleu; tu parles, mon ami!—you've said it!" cried de Grandin in delight.



"The ancient curse has been fulfilled, the wicked one's condition met. A kinsman has shed kinsman's blood upon the property inherited!"

"Why——"

"'Why' be doubled-damned and stewed in Satan's sauce-pan; I tell you it is so!" He swung his arm in an all-comprehensive gesture. "We have at once disposed of everything, my friend. The human villains who would murder you and Madame Pemberton, the working of the ancient curse pronounced so many years ago—all are eliminated!"

He leant above the body of a prostrate Indian, searching through his jacket with careful fingers. "*Ah-ha,* behold him!" he commanded. "Here is the thing that killed your so unfortunate retainer." He held a length of bamboo stick fitted at the end with something like a tuning-fork to which a rubber bulb was fixed. "Careful!" he warned as I reached out to touch it. "The merest prick of those sharp points is certain death."

Pressing the queer instrument against the wall, he pointed to twin spots of viscid, yellow liquid sticking to the stones. "Cobric acid—concentrated essence of the cobra's venom," he explained. "One drives these points into his victim's body—the sharp steel penetrates through clothing where a snake's fangs might not pierce — and *pouf!* enough snake-poison goes into the poor one's veins to cause death in three minutes. *Tiens,* it is a clever little piece of devilment, *n'est-ce-pas?*"

"D'ye think we got 'em all?" asked Pemberton.

"Indubitably. Had there been more, they would have been here. Consider: First they set their foul beast on us, believing he will kill some one of us, at least. He does not return, and they are puzzled. Could it be that we disposed of him? They do not know, but they are worried. Anon they hear the strains of Indian music in the house. This are not the way things had been planned by them. There should be no celebration here. They wonder more, and come to see what happens. They observe *Madame* concluding her so lovely dance; they also see us all unharmed, and are about to use their knives when you forestall them with your pistol."

"But there were two Burmese at the railway station the other day, yet someone threw the knife intended to kill Doctor Trowbridge," objected Pemberton. "That would indicate a third one in reserve——"

De Grandin touched the white man's sprawling body with the tip of his small shoe. "There was, my friend, and this is he," he answered shortly. "Your charming cousin, Monsieur Ritter. It was he who hid beside the tracks and hurled the knife when he beheld the mark of Kali. The Burmans knew friend Trowbridge; had it been one of them who lay in ambush he would not have wasted knife or energy in killing the wrong man, but Ritter had no other guide than the skull chalked on the car. *Tenez,* he threw the knife that killed the poor young man to death."

"How do you account for the fire that broke out just as Mrs. Pemberton had finished dancing?" I asked.

"There is no scientific explanation for it, at least no explanation known to modern chemistry or physics. We must seek deeper—farther—for its reason. Those Hindoo *gurus,* they know things. They can cast a rope into the air and make it stand so rigidly that one may climb it. They take a little, tiny seed and place it in the earth, and there, before your doubting eyes, it grows and puts forth leaves and flowers. Me, I have seen them take a piece of ordinary wood—my walking-stick, *parbleu!* — make passes

over it, and make it burst in flames. Now, if their ordinary showmen can do things like that, how much more able are their true adepts to bring forth fire at will, or on the happening of specific things? The rescue of the Hindoo girl Sarastai left the funeral pyre without a victim, and so the old priests placed a curse on her and hers, decreeing fire should take its toll of all her husband's family till kinsman had shed kinsman's blood. That was the fire that followed every generation of the Pembertons. This fire burned this house again, and yet again, burned one when he lay in safety in a fireproof room—even set a motorcar afire to kill the late proprietor of the estate.

"Tonight conditions were ideal. The sacred music of the temple sounded from the gramaphone, Madame Avis danced in Hindoo costume; danced an old, old dance, perhaps the very dance Sarastai used to dance. Our thoughts were tuned to India—indeed, there is no doubt the urge which prompted Madame Pemberton to dance a Hindoo dance in Hindoo costume came directly from the thought-waves set in motion by those old priests in the days of long ago. The very stones of this old house are saturated in malignant thought-waves—thoughts of vengeance — and Madame Avis was caught up in them and forced along the pathway toward destruction. All was prepared, conditions were ideal, the victims waited ready for the flames. Only one thing that old priest forgot to foresee."

"Jolly interestin'," murmured Pemberton. "What was it he forgot?"

"That you would ask advice of Jules de Grandin!" my little friend grinned shamelessly. "There it was he missed his trick. I am very clever. I looked the situation over and saw we were confronted by both physical and ghostly menaces. For the men we have the sword, the pistol and the fist. For the ghostly enemy we need a subtler weapon.

"Accordingly, when I go to the village to obtain the locks for doors and windows, I also stop to visit with the *curé* of the little church. Fortunately, he is Irish, and I do not have to waste a day convincing him. '*Mon père,*' I say, 'we are confronted with the devil of a situation. A crew of monkey-faces who give worship to the wicked ones of India are menacing a Christian family. They will undoubtlessly attempt to burn them up with fire —not ordinary fire, but fire they make by wicked, sinful, heathen incantations. Now, for ordinary fire we use the ordinary water; what should we use to put out fire that comes from hell, or hell's assistants?'

"That old priest smiles at me. He is no fool. 'My son,' he say, 'long, long ago the fathers of the Church discovered that it is hot work to fight the devil with fire. Therefore they invent holy water. How much of it will you be needing for your work?'

"He was a good and hospitable man, that priest. He had no whisky in the house, but he had beer. So we made a lunch of beer and cheese and biscuit, and when we finish, we clean a bottle out and fill him to the neck with *eau bénite.*

"'*Bonjour, mon fils,*' the old priest say, 'and when you win your fight with Satan's henchmen, remember that our church could use a new baptismal font.' You will remember that, I trust, *Monsieur,* when you get your inheritance?"

"By George, I'll build a new church for him, if he wants it!" promised Pemberton.

THE locomotive gave a long-drawn, mournful wail as the train drew near the station and the smiling porter hurried through the car collecting luggage.

"Well, we're home again," I remarked as the train slid to a stop.

"Yes, *grâce à Dieu*, we have escaped," de Grandin answered piously.

"It did look pretty bad at times," I nodded. "Especially when that fellow at the window poised his knife, and those devilish flames began to flicker——"

"Ah bah," he interrupted scornfully. "Those things? *Pouf*, they were not to be considered! I speak of something far more hideous we have escaped. That dreadful English cooking, that cuisine of the savage. That roast of mutton, that hell-brew they call coffee, that abominable apple tart!

"Come, let us take the fastest cab and hasten home. There a decent drink awaits us, and tonight in hell's despite I shall complete construction of the perfect bouillabaisse!"

Child of Atlantis

By EDMOND HAMILTON

What brooding shape of horror dwelt in the black castle that topped the sinister island on which a young American and his wife were shipwrecked on their honeymoon?

THE little yawl clove the blue waters of the sunlit sea, its white sails taut with a strong wind. Steadily it crept eastward across the vast wastes of the Atlantic, toward the Azores, still hundreds of miles away. In the cockpit at the stern, David Russell stood over the wheel, his lean, brown, bareheaded figure bent forward, his smiling gray eyes watching his wife.

Christa Russell was earnestly coiling ropes on the deck forward. Now she finished and came back toward him, a slim, boyish little figure in white slacks and blue jersey. Her soft, dark eyes, always oddly serious beneath her childish forehead and smoothly brushed black hair, met her husband's and returned his smile.

"Happy, kid?" he asked, his arm going around her slender waist as she jumped down into the cockpit to his side.

She nodded, her uplifted eyes adoring. "It's the best honeymoon anyone ever had, David. Just you and me and the sea."

He grinned. "I felt a little guilty about dragging you on a risky cruise like this, but you've been the best sailing partner I ever had. And the only one who could really cook."

He added, "Speaking of cooking, suppose you get down in that galley and exercise your talents, gal. I'm hungry."

Christa said dismayedly, "Oh, I'd forgotten all about lunch. I'll only be a few minutes."

She disappeared hurriedly down the companionway. Left alone, David Russell drew a long breath of utter contentment. His gray eyes swept the horizon happily. Sunlight and sea, a good boat

and a good wind, and his young wife—what more could any man want?

They had been married in Bermuda two weeks before. And David had proposed this cruise to the Azores in his yawl as a honeymoon. Fine weather and favoring winds had made it a dream voyage of sun-drenched days and moon-silvered nights.

David suddenly stiffened at the wheel. He had glimpsed something just ahead that was—queer. It was a strange, great flicker in the air, a wavering of light like the refraction of air above hot railway tracks. The whole area just ahead of the onward-racing yawl seemed flickering oddly like that.

He felt a sudden tinge of dim fear, of alarm. He moved his hand on the wheel to guide the yawl away from that weirdly flickering area. But before he could do so, the speeding boat had run directly into the edge of the queer area. The next moment——

A big island loomed dead ahead in the sea!

It was like hell-born magic to David's stunned brain. One moment he was sail-

"He fell with outstretched metal arms crashing purposefully down against the giant crystal."

ing with no speck of land in sight in the vast blue waste. Next moment, without warning, this island had suddenly clicked into sight, not a hundred yards ahead of the yawl.

David's stupefied eyes glimpsed the isle as a heavily forested mass of land, several miles across, towering to frowning black cliffs at its center. The shores were fringed with cruel, jagged rocks that showed like broken black fangs through the foam of wild waves breaking over them.

The yawl was running headlong onto these rocks, without chance of being turned in time. David, his face a gray mask of stupefied horror, dropped the wheel and yelled hoarsely.

"Christa! Quick!"

She came darting up the companionway, face white with alarm. "David, what——"

He grabbed her. At that instant, with terrific, grinding shock, the yawl struck the rocks.

They were thrown clear of its wildly tilting deck by the impact. And almost instantly they were sinking in the roaring waters, David still blindly gripping his wife.

THUNDER of the rushing waves was in his ears as they went down and down in the cold currents. He shifted his grip on Christa, and fought frantically with his other arm to rise. He came up, half strangled, to be nearly smothered by white foam and deafened by the roaring bellow of breaking waves.

They were flung like chips toward the jagged shore rocks. David struck out with his free arm in mad strokes to keep them away from the cruel stone fangs upon which the waves would hammer them to pulp. His left arm still gripped Christa with frantic strength as they were hurled forward.

His right shoulder grazed hidden rock, his shirt ripping and a brand of fire seeming to sear along his arm. As he was whirled around by the wild waves that were tossing them, he glimpsed the yawl, piled on the outer rocks, being hammered by the smashing waves.

The waves were hurling them on toward those menacing black teeth with the swiftness of a mill-race. A flat, jagged ledge rose a few feet from the foaming waters just ahead. The charging waves flung them hard against it.

David took the impact on his right shoulder, and felt the flesh bruise from the savage blow. With his numbed right arm he clawed wildly to cling to the edge of the ledge, a foot above his head. His fingertips gained the rim, then were torn loose as the receding waves sucked the two helpless humans back.

Back and back—and then again they bore them forward, like raging stallions of the sea, toward the ledge of rock. David felt his strength leaving him, knew desperately that he could not hold Christa longer, that if the waves swept them back out again, they would sink together.

The rushing waters again flung them like floating puppets against the rock. David's head hit the wall and he saw blinding light, felt the last remnants of strength melting from the stunning blow. Yet knowledge of death close at hand made him claw frenziedly for the ledge.

His fingers again gripped its brink—but his nerveless body had not the strength to haul them up onto it. Through the bellowing din, icy death seemed stooping to enfold them in his cold shroud. Then before the waters sucked back, a wave higher than the others lifted David and the girl a little. With a supreme effort, he used that moment to roll with her onto the ledge.

He lay there, hearing only dimly the

raging of the baffled seas just below him, the splatter of salty spray on his face. He was aware that Christa was bending frantically over him, as his consciousness darkened.

"David! David *dear!*" Her sobbing voice came thinly and remotely to his fading hearing. "David, we're safe now. I'll get help—get someone——"

And then there was only darkness in David Russell's brain.

It was the steady showering of the stinging spray on his face that finally revived his overtaxed body and brain. He opened his eyes, and weakly struggled up to a sitting position.

He was still on the ledge at the island's shore. The incoming combers were still smashing a few inches below him, flinging up great geysers of feathery foam, and a hundred yards outward the yawl lay grinding on the outer rocks where it had been tossed.

Where was Christa? She was nowhere in sight along the rocky, wave-dashed shore. David's clearing brain remembered now her frantic attempts to revive him. She had gone to look for help, and she was not back yet. How long had she been gone? Had something happened to her on this hellish island that had appeared so magically in the mid-Atlantic? Cold fear for his bride clutched at David's heart, and forced him to stagger weakly to his feet. Wildly he looked along the shore of the island.

From the sea-beaten, jagged rocks, a narrow strip of beach lifted toward the edge of the dark, great forest that seemed to cover most of the island. He saw tracks in the sand, leading toward the forest. Christa must have gone that way. He stumbled after her, spurred by apprehension. This island, a mysterious place that should not be—what danger might not Christa meet on it?

As he toiled up the slight grade of the beach, David's mind was still dazed by the suddenness with which the whole incredible thing had happened. This island had been utterly invisible to his eyes until the yawl had almost run onto it, had reached the edge of that strange flickering area. *Then* the island had clicked suddenly into sight.

He turned his head and looked wildly back out to sea, as he hastened on. David received another shock. He could not see more than a few hundred feet out from the island! He could look that far out over the rocks and waters, but beyond that limit he could see nothing but a weird flickering. His vision seemed to be repelled at that limit, to be turned back upon itself.

He looked upward. The sky had changed too. It was a strange, flickering sky of very dark blue, and the sun could not be seen in it. This nightmare island! It could not be seen by anyone outside it—and neither could anyone on the island see outside.

It was all crazy, incredible. But his dazed mind clung frantically to the thought of finding Christa. David reached the edge of the forest, and stood staring haggardly into its dark depths.

Huge, black-trunked trees rose for hundreds of feet, mighty columns supporting a canopy of green foliage high overhead. Thickets of brush and snaky creepers that bore enormous white blooms, choked the space between the trees. This forest loomed strangely silent in the weird, sunless day. And he saw beyond the waving tree-tops the towering central cliffs he had already glimpsed from the yawl. On those distant, frowning bluffs of dark rock crouched a monstrous square black castle.

David stared and stared over the great trees at that somber structure of mystery on the distant heights, his gaze fascinated

by its black domes and towers and unbroken, windowless walls. Then he tore his eyes from it and peered frantically along the forest edge for some trace of his wife.

"Woher kommst du?" The voice came from close behind him, with startling unexpectedness.

David spun around. Two men had come up behind him on the beach without his observing them. They were staring at him suspiciously.

The man who had asked the question in German was a solidly built, sandy-haired man of forty, with searching eyes. He was clad in a time-worn, ragged and stained gray uniform.

The other man was a huge, broad-shouldered Scandinavian in sweater and sea-boots almost as ragged, his weather-beaten Viking face a little older than that of the German, his blond head bare. Both men carried steel-pointed spears.

David Russell said, with difficulty, "I —I don't understand you." Then he cried, "In God's name, what kind of place is this?"

The German's suspicious face cleared and he exclaimed in English, "You're new here, then? Did your ship run onto the island? Were any others saved?"

To his excited questions, David answered, "We were in a yawl—my wife and I. This hellish island suddenly appeared right in front of us. Our boat struck—there it is out on the rocks. We got to shore, but I passed out, and when I came around, Christa was gone for help. And now I can't find her. I've got to find her!" he cried. "To get her away from this devilish place!"

The German shook his head sadly. "There is no escape from this island—none except death or whatever horrible fate the Master deals out to those whom he calls to his castle. I myself have been here on the island for twenty years."

"Twenty years?" cried David, appalled.

The Teuton nodded. "I am Leutnant Wilhelm von Hausman, of U-Boat 321 of the Imperial German Navy. In the spring of 1918 our boat, running on the surface to recharge our batteries, sighted a strange flickering just ahead. The next moment, this island appeared, we crashed into it, and I, who was on deck, was the only one saved."

He motioned toward the giant blond Scandinavian seaman. "This is Halfdon Husper, first mate of a Norwegian freighter that ran onto the island in 1929. There are a couple of hundred such survivors from similar wrecks—we have a little village over yonder in the forest."

David cried, "But why haven't you tried to get away? And what kind of hellish place is this island, anyway, that it's completely invisible until you're right on it?"

Von Hausman shrugged. "I know no more than you how the island is made invisible to the outside world. The Master has made it so, but how he does it, I can't guess."

"The Master?" repeated David. "Who is that?"

Von Hausman pointed to the black castle brooding on the distant cliffs. "That is the castle of the Master. He is supreme ruler of this island, but who or what he is, I cannot say, for none of us who live here have ever seen him."

"You mean—he never comes out of that place?" David asked wonderingly. "But then how do you know he exists?"

The German shuddered a little. "We know well he exists, because from time to time he calls one among us to the castle, and whoever goes into that black place never comes out again."

The torturing anxiety uppermost in David's mind burst forth. "But what

about my wife? I must find her—at once."

The big Norwegian, Halfdon Husper, spoke for the first time in rumbling, heavily accented English. He said to the German, "Some other of the men may have found the girl and taken her to the village."

Von Hausman nodded rapidly, his keen eyes narrowing. He told David, "It's possible some of the others took your wife to the village, as Halfdon says. I think you'd better come with us, at once."

HALF mad with torturing worry, David Russell started with the two ragged men at a trot through the forest. There was a faintly marked trail which the others appeared to know, that wound inward between the great trees and around huge fallen logs.

Even in the tense stress of his anxiety, he could not help noticing that the trees and vegetation around him were totally unfamiliar. He had never seen such trees, such huge flowers, such grotesque orange-podded fruits. It all seemed like a strange dream into which he had suddenly been plunged.

Von Hausman was telling him, "The village is not far ahead. It's a miserable little place, where we eke out life by gathering fruits and hunting the small animals, until the time comes when we die or the Master calls us."

He added somberly, "Almost I wish sometimes that the Master would call me and put an end to this wretched existence from which there is no escape."

They emerged soon into a shallow, unwooded valley at the center of the island. At the farther side of the valley rose the black, frowning cliffs, upon whose highest point squatted the brooding ebon castle.

David saw that in the valley lay a rude village of two or three score huts, built of logs and bark. The little village seemed to huddle there like a thing crouching in fear, beneath the black battlements of the cliffs and the Master's mysterious castle.

At the center of the village milled an excited crowd of men. The din of their shouting voices reached David and his two companions as they hurried forward. The lips of the German U-Boat officer tightened.

"It's as I feared—they've got your wife here," he rasped. "You're probably going to have to fight."

"Fight?" cried David.

Von Hausman nodded tightly. "Very few women ever get ashore alive on the island from the wrecks—only at long intervals. And the women go to those who can fight for them and keep them. Quick!"

They raced forward, between the rows of rude huts. Now David saw that there were perhaps two hundred men in the throng milling in shouting excitement ahead. He could see only a dozen or so women — ragged, frightened women — peering out of huts here and there.

But the mob of men! A ragged, hard-bitten throng that had been cast ashore here by the ships of every nation that had wrecked on this mysterious island. Red-faced British sailors, brown, snake-eyed Lascars, stalwart Scandinavians like Husper, swarthy Spanish and Italian and Portuguese seamen, bearded Russians and guttural-voiced Teutons, a score of other races, all milling excitedly around one central point.

David Russell and his two companions crashed through the shouting throng, David unnoticed by the ragged mob in its excitement. He burst into a small clear space at the center of the crowd. There he stopped, and shouted aloud.

"Christa!"

She was there, a slim, shrinking, boyish figure in her wet slacks and sweater. A stocky, simian, red-headed man of thirty with hard blue eyes and a button-nosed, craggy face, was holding her struggling form with one arm. He was shaking his other fist at the crowd and roaring belligerently, "I say this girl is mine! I found her there in the forest and if anyone else wants her, he can fight me for her, here and now."

A SUDDEN silence descended on the mob at the redhead's roaring challenge. Von Hausman muttered in David's ear, "It's Red O'Riley—a gun-runner whose schooner ran ashore here ten years ago. He's the toughest customer on the island."

But David wasn't listening. Flaming with rage, he had burst from the crowd and, with a savage twist, tore O'Riley's arm away from Christa and sent the redhead sprawling.

He gritted, "Damn you, this girl isn't for you or anyone else here. She's my wife."

Christa clung to his arm, sobbing with relief. "David, I was afraid you were dead! I went to try to find help and was caught——"

O'Riley had got to his feet, in a dead silence of stunned amazement on the part of the crowd. The gun-runner's craggy face split in a wide, menacing grin at David.

"So she's your wife, is she?" the redheaded man mocked harshly. "That's a good one! She may have been your wife by law outside, but there's devil a law on this cursed island except what the strongest man makes. I'm going to tear you apart and then take her."

The stocky gun-runner was savagely peeling off his ragged coat and shirt as he spoke, and stood now with gorilla-like, hairy chest bare, his great fists balled, advancing slowly on David.

David thrust the white-faced Christa back to von Hausman and Husper, at the edge of the crowd. The ragged mob was shouting now with increased excitement.

"Kill him, Red—tear the young squirt apart!" exultant voices bawled.

Von Hausman told David swiftly, "Try to finish him before he gets to you, or you won't have a chance."

David stepped out to meet the grimly advancing O'Riley. As he looked at the redhead's huge shoulders, barrel chest and simian arms, David's heart sank within him. He was still half exhausted from the battle through the waves an hour before, and he knew that even in the best of condition he would be no match for O'Riley. Yet if he were killed, Christa's possible fate in this weird, brutal place—the thought filled him with a wild, desperate frenzy.

He suddenly rushed, his left fist driving out with every ounce of his strength. It smashed against O'Riley's craggy jaw, and the Irishman rocked for a moment. David leaped in and smashed with right and left at the redhead's face with everything he had, and his enemy clawed for balance.

A wild howl went up from the mob, but David's heart was cold with knowledge that he had hit O'Riley with everything he had—and had failed to knock him down. With a bear-like snarl of rage, shaking his head as though to clear his eyes, the redhead rushed forward. David tried to sidestep but his foot slipped on the loose gravel. Then something hit him a terrific blow on the mouth, and everything was in a red mist, and he was dimly aware that his back was lying on the damp ground and that something hot and sticky was running on his lips. And O'Riley was standing there, snarling down at him.

"Get up! Get up before I beat you to death lying there."

"David!" That heartbroken sob was in Christa's voice. He recognized it through the mistiness that had seized his brain.

He staggered to his feet, lunged forward with fists balled. *Crash!* The crunching blows seemed to explode out of nothing against his face, and he knew he had gone to his knees this time. His brain was rocking—he felt he was done for. There wasn't an ounce of strength left in his nerveless body.

"David!" That agonized cry again pierced his numbness of mind and body, making him somehow struggle up again.

As though through crimson fog, he saw O'Riley's snarling face. David hitched drunkenly to one side, drove his right with clumsy aimlessness. The blow connected with something—there was a grunt of pain from O'Riley, and the big redhead staggered, clutching his solar plexus.

"Finish him!" Von Hausman was yelling somewhere in the shouting mob.

David summoned his last spark of strength, swayed forward and jabbed both clenched fists at a staggering, dimly-seen O'Riley. His fists crashed onto hard bone with stinging pain—and there was a wilder shout as O'Riley slumped from his feet, collapsed to a sitting position and looked up with stunned, half-conscious gaze of utter bewilderment.

DAVID stumbled over to where Von Hausman held Christa. He was reeling, almost unable to stand, but he tried to quiet her sobbing. Suddenly a great hand tore him around, and he faced one of the brutal mob, a black-bearded, wolf-faced Russian.

"You fight *me* now for the girl," the Russian grinned evilly. "I want her, too."

Von Hausman's face flamed with rage and he cried, "No, Bardoff! *Gott in Himmel,* this man is dead on his feet! You can't——"

Bardoff swept him aside with a growl, and the ragged mob cheered. "You fight, or I take her!" the Russian growled at David.

Halfdon Husper, the huge Norwegian, shouldered forward with pale eyes blazing. "You'll fight me first if you try that," he warned Bardoff.

"And me also!" snapped Von Hausman.

"Yes, and me too!" roared a third, unsteady voice. It was Red O'Riley. He had staggered to his feet, his battered, bruised face still bleeding, but his eyes were raging at the Russian. The redhead bellowed, "By heaven, this lad whipped me fairly and it's me that's with him."

Bardoff yelled furiously to the motley mob, "Do you allow them to do this? Why shouldn't we take the woman from them?"

"Yes, let's take her!" howled a score of brutal voices.

David Russell, swaying, hardly able to stand, saw Von Hausman and Husper and the bruised O'Riley bunch together and raise their fists and rude spears.

The ragged mob surged toward them, with Bardoff in the lead. Christa hid her face on David's shoulder. Then suddenly a strange, an awful thing, happened.

Bardoff, the Russian, suddenly stopped short, his whole body stiffening as though turned to stone. Then slowly, mechanically, he turned and began to walk away with strange, stiff strides—to walk toward the frowning black cliffs. And as he walked, he shrieked wildly to the suddenly transfixed mob, "The Master! His will is on me—he is calling me!"

The mob shrank back in dread. David saw that the Russian's face was now that of a soul in hell as he marched stiffly on like a human automaton toward the cliffs.

"Gott!" breathed Von Hausman,

white-faced. "Another of us, called by the Master!"

"Save me!" the receding Russian was screaming wildly. "Save me from the Master!"

Not one person made a move toward him; all shrank back in horrified dread, toward the shelter of the huts. The Russian strode stiffly on, and now had started up a steep path that climbed the cliff toward the brooding castle.

David, staring with Christa terrifiedly clinging to him, and with the German and Husper and O'Riley the only others now left in the clearing, saw the doomed man climbing straight toward the front of the monstrous black castle. He saw a door appear in the blank, black front of the building. The Russian strode stiffly through, his last wild despairing cry floating faintly down to them. Then the aperture closed after him.

Through the three men beside David and Christa went a sigh of horror. Von Hausman's keen eyes were haunted as he told David, "You see now why we all dread the Master so. We never know at what moment he will call us, nor what dark, unholy doom he deals out to those whom he summons into the castle."

"But why did the man go up there, when he didn't want to?" David protested. "He was terrified, yet he walked straight on."

Halfdon Husper told him solemnly, "The will of the Master was on him and he could not resist—no human can resist when that call comes."

"Ja," said the German darkly. "Whatever thing it is that lairs up in that unholy place, it can throw its will on any of us, call us to it, whenever it wishes. It is so we shall all end in time, if we do not die first."

"Not Christa and I!" David declared passionately. "I'm going to get her away from this hellish island, somehow."

Red O'Riley's bruised face grinned approval.

"I'm with you there, lad," he declared. "Ten years I've been on this devil's place, ever since my schooner that was loaded with guns for Abd-el-Krim piled up here in the night. I've seen a plenty of men called up there by the old Satan that lives in that castle, and I'm damned if I'll sit around here longer twiddling my thumbs waitin' for him to call *me*. I'll risk anything to get away."

Von Hausman shrugged hopelessly. "It is useless to talk of it—you know what happens to anyone who tries to escape from the island. However, we can discuss that later. These two must have a place to live, so Halfdon and I will give them our hut."

He led the way along the street of wretched huts. It was growing dusky now. There was no sun or sunset visible in the flickering sky, but that sky steadily was darkening into a thick, strange twilight. The great forest loomed in deep shade now, gloomy and forbidding. Up on the cliff above the valley, the black stronghold of the dreaded Master bulked ominously against the dusking sky.

Von Hausman led them into a small bark cabin. It was unfurnished, save for beds of boughs, and a pile of strange-looking fruit in one corner. They sat down together in the dusky interior, and ate the fruit. David found it tasted as queer as it looked. Christa nestled nervously at his side, silent, still overwhelmed.

David could hardly yet believe in the reality of this strange place, this island invisible to the outer world, peopled by survivors of a hundred past wrecks, ruled by the mysterious, unseen occupant of the black castle. Yet Von Hausman and Husper and O'Riley ate with quiet

matter-of-factness. The redheaded gunrunner had apparently forgotten all animosity against David.

When he had finished, O'Riley tossed the fruit-husks outside and stretched back, groaning, "What I wouldn't give now for a pipe and something to put in it. I swear if I ever get away from here I'll smoke for six months without stopping even to sleep."

David asked the German, "Why do you say it's impossible to escape from the island? It seems to me that it shouldn't be hard to make some sort of raft or dugout canoe, and launch it. Once away from the island, out where you could be seen by passing ships, you'd have a good chance of being picked up."

Von Hausman laughed mirthlessly. "A good many men on this island have thought that and have tried to get away in rafts or rude boats. And sooner or later in each case, before they could start, the Master called them. Whatever it is that dwells up in the castle, it does not want anyone to escape from this island—no!"

"That is so," rumbled the great Norwegian. "And that is why we no longer try to escape. It is hard to live here as we do—but it is more terrible to feel the will of the Master on you, to answer his call and go up into his castle never to return."

Christa, peering out through the doorway with wide eyes at the enigmatic black structure looming in the dusky sky, clung to her husband in shivering dread. "David, I'm afraid!"

He soothed her, yet felt as though a cold, alien wind of dread had blown over him, too. He asked, "But who or what is the Master? You say you don't know—but you must have some idea."

Von Hausman said thoughtfully, "We do not know because those who see the Master up there never come out again. But one thing I am sure of—*the Master is immortal.*"

And as David and Christa stared at him incredulously, the U-boat officer continued, "I believe that this island has existed here, invisible and unsuspected by the world, for countless centuries; for along its shores I have found old, rotted wreckage and metal objects from ships of many centuries back, from Eighteenth Century frigates and Sixteenth Century slavers, and Spanish caravels like those of Columbus—even wreckage of a Greek galley that must have ventured into these western seas more than two thousand years ago."

Von Hausman added, "That shows the island has been here, invisible, for centuries. Now the only thing that can keep this island invisible to the outside world is some force or power exerted by the Master. Therefore the Master must have dwelt here during all those centuries."

David made an impatient gesture. "After all, I don't care who or what the Master is. What I want to do is to get Christa away from this unholy place. I'm going to do that somehow, Master or no Master."

"And it's me that seconds the motion," promptly declared O'Riley. "What the devil!—this isn't any place for a man of action like meself to be moldering away his life. We'll build ourselves a boat and launch it, and the back of our hands to the Master if he tries to stop us."

"We wouldn't need to build a boat," David said eagerly. "My yawl—it was tossed up onto the outer rocks down at the shore. I think the hull is stove in a little and the masts are snapped, but there are tools in it and we could patch it up enough to be seaworthy, in a few days." He added passionately, "Isn't it better to try it than to sit here and do nothing? It may be true that before we

can escape in it, the Master will call us as he has done the others who tried to escape. But if we just sit here, it seems that sooner or later we'll be called to the same fate anyway. So why not try to get away?"

"Sure, and why not?" echoed O'Riley. "We've got nothin' to lose but our lives."

Halfdon Husper said slowly, "I say, try it then. I have a wife in Oslo, if she still lives. And I am weary of waiting for death here."

They all looked at Von Hausman. After a moment, the German said quietly, "I have been here longer than any of you. I am quite certain that this attempt to escape will mean death for all of us. And not quick, easy death, but some horrible fate at the Master's hands. It is sure that, before we can ever launch that boat, we shall be called up there to that fate." His keen eyes smiled. "Yet I also say, let us try it. I too am weary of waiting idly for death here."

"Then we four will go down and start work on the yawl in the morning," David declared. He added troubledly to his young wife, "Christa, you're going to stay here while we work. No one here will bother you now, and if you do not go with us there is less chance of the Master's doom falling on you, if it does fall."

"I want to be with you, David!" she cried. But after a little, at David's anxiety, she gave in and consented to remain in the hut while they worked.

NIGHT passed quickly, a strange, starless and moonless night, with only the unceasing flickering visible in the dark sky. And when dawn came it was a gray, sunless dawn, a slow, gradual increase in light. Leaving Christa in the hut, the four made their way quietly out of the village and through the forest to the beach.

The yawl still lay on the rocks where it had been tossed. David fished axes, saws and other tools from its hold, and they began the work. Halfdon Husper, most experienced of them, took charge as they rudely patched the holes in the hull.

Ever and again through the day, David glanced tensely over his shoulder at the distant cliffs and castle.

Von Hausman noticed that and said quietly, "Do not fear, *mein freund*, the Master is watching us. That is sure."

"Let him watch!" rasped David desperately. "We'll get away—we will!"

But when they returned into the village that evening, they saw that the ragged motley mob there now looked at them with awe and dread. These others had discovered during the day that they were working on the yawl.

"They already look on us as doomed by the Master, as dead men," commented the German.

O'Riley bristled. "Anyone who tries anything on me will find out that it's a damned tough dead man I am," he declared. "And that goes for the old devil up in the castle, too."

Christa cried softly in David's arms that night. "David, I feel that something terrible is going to happen to you. And if it did, I wouldn't want to live."

"Nothing's going to happen to me," he insisted despite the fatal foreboding in his heart. "We'll get away."

By the end of the next day, the four men had completely, if crudely, patched the holes in the yawl's hull. They got it afloat, secured it by cables to the rocks. Halfdon Husper regarded their work with satisfaction.

"Tomorrow we will cut and fit new spars," the Norwegian said. "Then——"

DAY was beginning to fade eerily as they returned to the village. It looked stricken, deserted—no one was abroad in it, but from the doors of the

huts, horrified faces stared silently at them. Christa was not in the bark cabin. Nor did she answer David's calls.

"Something's happened to her!" he cried. "Some of these brutes——"

Gripping the ax he had brought back from the yawl, he ran wildly down the rude street. He plucked a man out of the door of one of the huts, a loutish Breton sailor who stared at him with ignorant, horror-widened eyes.

"What's happened to my wife?" snarled David, raising the ax menacingly. "If some of you have harmed her, I'll kill you!"

The Breton, gasping in David's furious, choking grip, stammered an answer. "It was not us—the girl is gone for ever. An hour ago the call of the Master came upon her, and she climbed the cliff and passed up into the castle. She did not want to go—she screamed as all they who feel the call scream, but she could not help herself."

David felt the blood leave his heart as the ghastly truth penetrated his mind. He saw infinite pity on the faces of his three friends, and heard Von Hausman whisper, *"Gott,* the Master has summoned her. We shall never see her again."

"I *will* see her again!" raved David wildly. "I'm going up there and try to get her out, if I have to go alone!"

He suddenly turned on the ragged, motley men staring from the huts, and lashed them with raging words of volcanic fury. "You men—are you really men or are you sheep, that you sit here and let whatever creature is up in that castle kill you at his will? Whoever the Master is, he must be living, and that means that he can be killed! Why don't you try to kill him, instead of submitting humbly to his will? Why don't you storm the castle and destroy him, instead of waiting for him to destroy you one by one?"

A fierce yell burst from the men before him, hard-bitten, brutal men from all the seven seas, whose smoldering hate and fear of the Master had been fanned to a quick blaze by David's raging words.

A flashing-eyed Italian sailor waved his spear aloft and cried, "By the saints, he speaks truth! Why do we not pull down the demon that crouches up there?"

"That's the stuff, lads!" cried Red O'-Riley exultantly.

"Aye, death to the Master!" boomed Halfdon Husper's great voice, the huge Norwegian's eyes flaming with long-repressed hatred.

"Death to the Master!" burst a raging chorus of two hundred voices, as rude spears and swords waved thick from the maddened men.

David, his face half crazed with rage, shook his heavy ax and cried, "Up the cliff, then! We'll storm the Master's castle before he can claim my wife as another victim!"

THEY poured out of the village, a roaring, raging mob of savage seamen from every nation, every man with his weapon, every man afire to destroy the mysterious being whom they had dreaded so long.

David ran at their head, his face white and set, his ax gripped in his hand, with the exulting O'Riley and the blazing-eyed Norwegian and Von Hausman, curiously calm, behind him. Close after the four streamed the wild mob. David led them straight to the cliff and up the steep, narrow path in single file. He knew that if they had time to recover from their rage, the old dread of the Master would rapidly repossess them.

Above them bulked ominously against the dusky sky the mysterious black castle. It seemed to David that as they neared

the top of the cliff, the raging roar of his mob of followers lessened a little, their pace slackened.

O'Riley yelled back to them, "On, comrades! In a minute we'll be inside the Master's castle!"

"Death to the Master!" thundered back the wild, climbing horde.

Now David and the three friends close at his heels climbed onto the sheer rock shelf in front of the castle. The huge square structure loomed black and somber before them, doorless and windowless.

"There's a door somewhere in front here!" David cried. "We'll find it!"

He led them at a run toward the towering, black wall of smooth stone that was the front of the citadel.

Suddenly he stopped short, and at the same moment every man behind halted in his tracks. He could not go forward! He wanted to, for every fiber in his body was aflame with raging desire to rush forward and break into this structure into which Christa had gone. But he could not take a single step forward. It was as though his legs had suddenly ceased to obey his brain's commands, and were under outside control.

The men behind him, smitten to a halt by the same weird phenomenon, were struck silent with stupefaction for a moment. Then a cry of horror and dread went up from the ragged mob.

"The Master's will is on us!"

"God save us—the Master has us in his grip!"

David fought to move forward, making a tremendous effort of his will to move his legs even one step. Sweat stood out on his forehead, but he could not move.

He heard a confused cry of terror from the mob behind him. Then he saw that the ragged horde, and also Von Hausman and Husper and O'Riley, had begun to move back down the cliff, walking with stiff, mechanical strides down the path.

"O'Riley! Halfdon! Come back!" yelled David hoarsely. "We can still break in and destroy that demon inside."

The big Irishman, his face white and beaded with sweat, called thickly back, "Lad, we can't!"

And Von Hausman, as they marched stiffly away down the path, cried back up to David, "The Master—his will is making us return to the village!"

Stiffly striding, shouting in their terror now, David's ragged followers descended the path up which they had raged a few moments before, and stiffly his three friends followed despite their struggles. David was left standing alone in the flickering dusk before the enormous citadel.

Suddenly his legs began to move under him. Stiffly as those of a dead man, they stalked forward with him toward the front of the great building. He could not control that movement—it was another brain that was directing his forward strides. But he did not try to fight it now, for in his throbbing brain was only the desire to get into the castle where Christa was. Still gripping his ax tightly in his hand, he strode forward with those mechanical steps.

As he neared the blank black wall of the citadel, a tiny round aperture appeared in it. The aperture expanded rapidly, like an opening camera shutter, into a round door beyond which he saw a great hall filled with misty blue light. David strode on, into that blue-lit hall, and heard the door close with a sighing sound after him.

Tramp, tramp—the steady strides, which he did not himself will, took him across the great hall. He saw through the light-mists, massive, shining mechanisms of unearthly design standing about him,

He passed on through them, into a huge vaulted corridor.

David's legs took him on down that corridor. Somewhere in this building the Master was drawing David to him, controlling his body by super-hypnotic force. He passed other halls and corridors, all flooded with pale, misty blue luminescence, holding weird instruments and mechanisms of unfathomable purpose. Then he emerged into a colossal domed central hall.

He stared with fascinated, stupefied eyes as he was drawn forward. At the center of this mighty chamber poised a ten-foot crystal sphere inside which pulsed a throbbing core of living azure fire, like a miniature, misty blue sun.

In front of this titan crystal of pulsing light was a throne-like metal chair he could just glimpse through a shroud of concealing light-mists. And he glimpsed or sensed someone, something, sitting upon that metal throne. Facing the throne stood——

"Christa!" cried David hoarsely.

The girl stood, a wild terror frozen upon her face, her slim, childish body silhouetted against the blue light.

She turned at David's cry, tried to run toward him but could not move, rooted by the same force that was drawing him stiffly forward. Anguish had leaped into her eyes at sight of him.

"David!" she uttered in a sobbing cry. "You came after me—came to your doom——"

He was beside her now. And there, without command of his own brain, his stiff strides suddenly stopped. He tried to step to Christa and take her in his arms, but could not. He could only reach out with one hand, and touch her trembling cheek.

She stared ahead once more, horror unveiled in her eyes. David turned his head and looked forward to what she stared at, that metal throne whose base could just be glimpsed through the curling blue light-mists that surrounded it.

David gripped his ax tighter. Yet he felt utterly helpless, powerless, standing with the girl before that shrouded throne and before the colossal crystal of throbbing light.

Out of the light-mists around the throne spoke the voice of the Master, a metallic voice of chill, measured accents.

"Man from outside, you interest me," the passionless, cold voice of the Master told David. "You tried to do what no other here ever tried to do, attack me in revolt. I am sorry now I did not call you here sooner—I meant in any case to call you and your friends because of your childish attempt to escape the island."

David tried to keep his voice steady. "You can do what you want with me," he told the Master. "I know that. But I will submit willingly, gladly, if you will allow the girl to go."

"No, David!" cried Christa. "I share your fate! If you die, I die!"

The Master's metallic voice told them, "Your argument is purposeless. My will rules here and not yours—it rules even your own bodies, as you have learned. My actions are not to be disturbed by your tiny clamor. It is my intention to use the body of this girl at once as material for certain interesting experiments which I have long been performing on humans whom I called from the village. As for you, man who dared attack me, you will have the same fate, a little later."

"You're not going to use Christa's body for your experiments," said David in a thick, hoarse voice. "You're not!"

He was slowly, stealthily, raising the heavy ax. If he could throw it, if he could hurl it into the shrouding mists at the thing on the metal throne——

His hand flashed up for the wild cast —and froze in midair, gripping the ax! He could not throw the weapon!

The veins on David's neck corded with tremendous effort, but his arm and shoulder muscles would not obey his will.

"You fool!" scorned the cold accents of the Master. "Did you not think that I could read your intention in your mind, that I could hold your arms powerless by my will as easily as your legs? Do you think me a stupid, blundering creature of flesh and blood like yourself? Look, human, and see!"

The light-mists drifted swiftly away from the seat of the Master as he spoke. There on the metal throne before the great crystal of throbbing light, he sat unveiled.

David felt his brain reeling as he stared. He heard a choking of horror from Christa.

The Master was a metal robot—a mechanical creature of coppery metal, formed like a horrible travesty of humanity, with metal arms, legs and cylindrical body, and a bulbous metal head or braincase out of which two glittering, unwinking eye lenses watched them.

"God, a robot!" cried David. "A machine, created by somebody——"

"And a machine greater far than its creators!" came the cold voice of the Master.

There was a strange note of pride in the robot's chill accents. It was as though it was speaking, out of that resonator mouth below its eyes, not to the transfixed David and Christa but to itself.

"Yes, they were men like you who created me," he was saying, "though men wiser far than you in the craft and skill of science. Long, long ago that was, long ago in ancient Atlantis whose fertile continent stood here in the sea where now only this little island stands, and where the races of men had reached their highest civilization.

"The scientists of Atlantis had built many wonderful mechanisms, some of them completely automatic and self-sustaining in operation. And they dreamed finally of creating a machine with brain and mind.

"I was that machine. There in Atlantis, ages past, I was born in the laboratories of the greatest scientists. My body was easy to build, but for decades they worked on the metal brain they meant to give me.

"That brain, when they finished it, was incomparably more complex in its metal neurone structure than is the human brain. Because of that, it could receive and classify an incomparably greater number of thought-patterns. That meant that I had the capacity for infinitely greater knowledge and memory than any human.

"The scientists instructed me, proud of my progress. But very soon I had learned all that they could teach me, and as I passed beyond them in knowledge and power, they began to realize that they had created a being greater than themselves."

There was a brooding note of undying hate in the metallic voice of the robot.

"I became great in power in Atlantis, the final oracle in all problems. To the populace I was a god, and as such I was worshipped and had my temple. Power I loved, not for its own sake, but only because it enabled me to continue my quest for new knowledge.

"Then the Atlantean scientists who had created me regretted their work, and wished to destroy me. They aroused the populace against me and attacked my temple with the most powerful weapons they could muster. I repelled them, but they attacked me again. At last I grew weary of their harrying, and I resolved to destroy all Atlantis and its people, ex-

cept for the land on which my temple stood.

"In a single night, I did the thing. For long I had gathered my powers and on that night I unchained them, and they smote down into the earth's structure far beneath the continent of Atlantis, and touched off great earth-faults that I knew existed there in the depths. And in that one night, all the continent of Atlantis and all its people sank downward and the sea crashed over the land and hid it for ever.

"All but one small portion of the continent, the portion around my temple! *That* did not sink, for I had provided against that, setting up certain radiated forces which sustain that small bit of land as an island above the waves. That great crystal of blue fire which you see behind me, man from outside, is the source of the radiation which still upholds the island. Were it not for that crystal's radiation, the slender pinnacle of rock which bears up this island must have collapsed long ago.

"Also there is a force mingled in the crystal's radiation which refracts light around the island, keeping it invisible to the outside world, so that I will not be annoyed by the curiosity of the barbarian races of men. Occasionally ships have crashed onto my invisible island as yours did, and men have gained its shore. I have suffered them to live down there in their wretched village because I sometimes need their bodies for my researches."

The glittering lens-eyes of the Master seemed to muse upon the stricken Christa and upon David, still standing petrified with his ax upraised.

"Man from outside, why do I speak of these things to you who can little understand them?" asked the robot. "It is for only one reason—it is because I am lonely.

"Yes, I, the child of old Atlantis, long more and more for contact with a mind equal to my own. I have resolved to create one, a metal brain as intelligent as mine. That is the purpose that engages me, and it is upon issues connected with that purpose that I am experimenting upon the bodies of humans like you and this girl."

"Not upon Christa's body — no!" shouted David hoarsely.

"Do you think to frighten me by mouthing futile threats?" asked the robot calmly. "Man from outside, you humans begin to weary me. I think it is well that the girl go now to the laboratories, where you will follow in due course."

Christa uttered a heart-torn cry. "David, good-bye——"

"No, you're not going there!" David cried. He was making tremendous mental effort to free his arm from the hypnotic grip of the Master, to hurl his ax. But the Master's super-hypnotism held him powerless.

Across David's brain seared a lightning expedient, a thought that he suppressed as soon as he was aware of it. He desperately began to think, to think a *lie*.

He began to think of stirrings in the dim ocean depths below where wrecked Atlantis lay entombed, of mighty scientists emerging from tight chambers where they had lain sleeping, and not dead. He thought of them vowing vengeance upon the robot they had created, of assembling great weapons, of sending him, David Russell, ahead as a spy upon the robot.

The Master read the lie in David's mind and for a moment was deceived by it. For the robot leaped wildly upright.

"Then they of Atlantis are not all dead!" cried the metallic voice. "They come again against me——"

For that single moment of wild excitement, the Master's mind relaxed its remorseless hypnotic grip upon David and Christa.

That one instant was enough. In it, David's muscles exploded in mad action and sent the ax in his hand flying straight toward the robot's head.

The heavy ax-head crashed squarely into the bulbous metal brain-case, between the lens-like eyes. The steel blade drove deep through the outer casing into the interior of the head, deep into the metal brain that had been created ages ago in the laboratories of dead Atlantis.

The Master staggered. His metallic voice uttered an awful, broken scream.

"Tricked! Tricked by a barbarian creature of flesh! But I will destroy you all——"

Even as he uttered that dying scream, the Master was whirling, was falling. But he fell with outstretched metal arms crashing purposefully down against the giant crystal of blue fire behind him, the crystal whose radiated force alone held the island from sinking beneath the waves.

The crystal shivered beneath the cracking impact of the dead robot's falling body. The blue fire inside it dulled and died instantly. David heard Christa cry out, run into his arms.

Then they were thrown from their feet by a terrific earth shock. They heard a thunderous roar from the earth beneath the castle, and the crash of the castle's black walls as they were riven by the awful shock.

DAVID grabbed his wife and plunged desperately across the huge halls and corridors whose walls were collapsing and crashing around him. He glimpsed daylight through a great gap in the outer wall, and he leaped with Christa through the gap out into the day. They stopped on the shelf of the cliff, for a moment appalled.

The whole island was heaving and rocking like a ship on a stormy sea. The thunderous earth-shocks were following each other at intervals of seconds, and there was a long, grinding roar from deep beneath that told of shifting, settling masses. The sun had appeared in the sky since the light-refracting force had died, but the heavens were instantly overcast with an ominous crimson pall.

The two fled down the path into the valley, David feeling nausea from the roll and buck of the earth beneath him. In the valley, the huts were in ruins and their ragged occupants were running about in mad panic. Von Hausman and O'Riley and the great Norwegian came running wildly up to David and the girl. *"Gott in Himmel!"* yelled the German. "What is——"

"The island is sinking into the sea!" screamed David over the roaring crashes. "I killed the Master, and in dying he acted to make the island sink. Our only chance is to get to the yawl!"

"To the yawl, then!" shouted Husper, his face crimson with excitement.

They sprinted forward, into the forest, the earth still rolling and heaving wildly under their feet.

"Saints in heaven, look!" cried O'Riley, glancing back horrified.

With terrible, reverberating roll of thunder, the cliff and ruined castle of the Master were collapsing in masses of rock onto the valley they had just quitted.

"On!" yelled Von Hausman.

Fissures opened on either side of them as they plunged through the wild-waving woods. Terrific tremors crashed down trees and twice knocked them from their feet.

They burst out onto the beach. The sea

before them was wild, great waves rushing madly in to shore and then out again, threatening to tear from its cables the mastless yawl that bobbed crazily on the waters.

They waded out through the rising waters, smashed by inrushing waves, shaken by the shifting of the rocks beneath their feet, and finally clambered onto the pitching yawl.

"Cut loose!" shouted Halfdon Husper.

David's ax sliced the cables. The yawl whirled crazily like a cork, then was sucked far, far back out to sea by the waters now receding at mill-race speed from the island—out and out, until the waters halted for a moment in awful dead calm. And from that distance they glimpsed the whole island, with solemn, grinding drum-roll from far beneath, sinking down into the waters.

The last black mass of the island plunged down under the sea. Then the waters around the yawl boiled terrifically and raced wildly with the little boat toward the spot where the island had been, a mad maelstrom of converging currents.

Halfdon Husper thrust the others by main force down into the cabin of the yawl, leaped in after them and slammed the hatchway shut. Next moment they were tossed violently against the walls of the dark cabin as the yawl seemed to stand up on its stern. David, still holding Christa tightly, felt his head strike the cabin wall and knew nothing more.

When he awoke, brilliant sunset light was in his eyes. He was lying on the deck of the yawl, and Christa and his friends were bending anxiously over him. Husper had a great bruise on his face, but the others did not seem injured.

David struggled to sit up, his dazed eyes sweeping the waters. The sea was still heaving and troubled, but the terrific currents had vanished. There was no sign of the island or of any other land anywhere in the tossing blue waste.

David stammered, "The yawl — it wasn't sucked down by the currents, then?"

Von Hausman, his quiet face still pale, said, "No, but it must have been only a reverse under-current that snatched us back out of the maelstrom. The yawl was actually under water when that current gripped us."

O'Riley, drawing a long breath, nodded his flaming head in corroboration. "It's me that was saying my prayers that minute!"

Christa was crying eagerly, "David, we've sighted the smoke of a ship coming —we're going to be picked up!"

His arm encircled her tightly. But for the moment his eyes were not looking at her, but gazing fascinatedly at the heaving waters, into whose green depths the lifeless metal form and shattered castle of the Master had sunk for ever. The child of old Atlantis, he had gone down at last to rejoin his creators in death.

The Voyage of the Neutralia

By B. WALLIS

An exciting story of weird adventures and a strange voyage through space to other planets—by the author of "The Abysmal Horror" and other fascinating thrill-tales

The Story Thus Far

AYLMER CARSCADDEN, eminent American scientist, discovers and manufactures metal impervious to gravitation, and also under intense cold repelled by other substances. He is financed by Hugh Burgoyne. They construct a large shell, christened *Neutralia,* with which to explore beyond our planet's atmosphere. The two, with Jacob Flint, an old employee, set out for our satellite. After starting, two former employees, Kobloth and Whipps, discharged for spying, are found stowaways in the storeroom.

After some experiments in arresting the stupendous speed of the shell they arrive safely at the moon. Finding an atmosphere, though rarefied, capable of supporting life, they alight in the great crater of Copernicus. Moss and giant cacti are the sole vegetation; but gold and diamonds are found in large deposits.

While the scientist is inspecting these, Kobloth and Whipps suddenly attack Carscadden and Flint, stunning them with rocks. The treacherous pair instantly dash for the shell, hoping to make off with it and later return to exploit the vast wealth they have seen. Burgoyne, however, arrives on the scene and at point of his gun compels them to surrender.

Carscadden and Flint recovering, all return, and the prisoners are locked in the storeroom. Then the shell is headed for Mars. Traveling at a million miles an hour they arrive and alight. They find the surface is covered with a network of great cables. A curious carriage comes racing along a cable, and its occupant immediately attacks them with electrified wires. Other carriages arrive and join in the attack.

The story continues:

STARTLED by its strangeness, the voyagers halted involuntarily, and instantly saw that along all the cables, converging toward the spot beneath which lay the *Neutralia,* hundreds of the spider-Martians were racing. The air was rent with their weird shrill cries, and throbbed with the drone of their powerful propelling mechanisms. In a few seconds the nearest would be directly above them!

"Quick, into the globe!" snapped Carscadden. "Give me a lift up and I'll throw out another ladder. I can find one at once. See that Kobloth and Whipps are the last to ascend. Quick! here come their wires!"

Instantly Burgoyne had the scientist on his shoulders, and the globe being a little tilted toward them Carscadden eas-

This story began in WEIRD TALES for November

ily swung himself into it. A second more and a rope ladder had fallen beside the big sentinel, who, revolver in hand, held off the two scoundrels who had tried to seize it.

"Stand back! You two go last—or stay as dead men!" he shouted angrily. "Up you go, Flint," he ordered in the same breath.

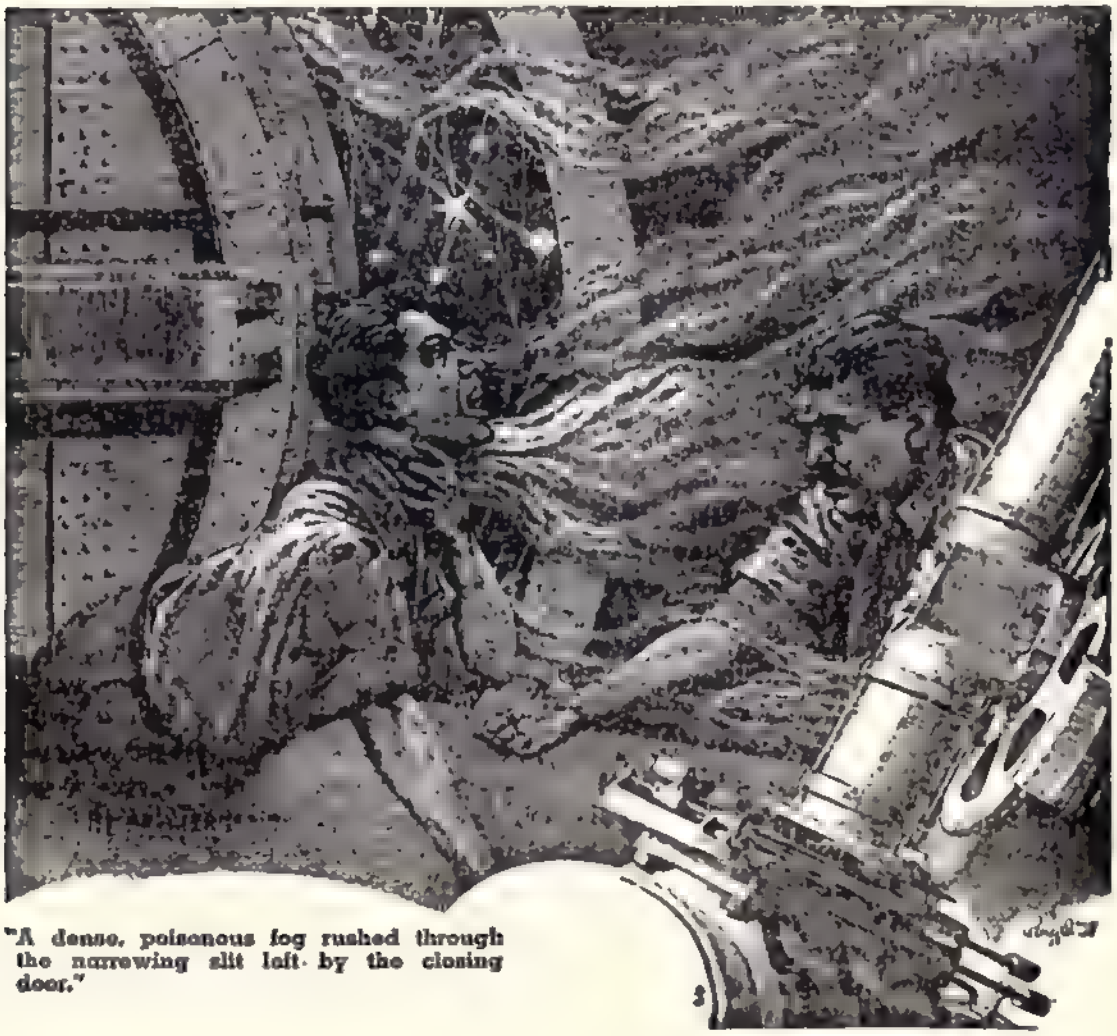
At once Flint scrambled up the swaying steps, and Burgoyne, still threatening the desperate pair of ruffians with his leveled revolver, was on the point of following his example, when from above came a cry:

"Look out, Hugh! Jump for it!"

But he was too late; for a bright thin wire had dropped from aloft, caught in the ladder's middle, and instantly had dragged it away from the globe, with Burgoyne hanging by one hand to its last step.

"Jump for the door, Hugh! Quick!" shouted Carscadden desperately.

"Sure!" muttered Burgoyne to himself. "But it's a cent to a million dollars I miss it." And as the end of the ladder dangling from the rapidly updrawn wire came abreast of the door, he twisted around with a supreme effort and made a flying



"A dense, poisonous fog rushed through the narrowing slit left by the closing door."

leap for the open door, where with outstretched hands the two already there awaited to snatch at him. He only just managed to clutch the outer flange of the doorway, but in a breath the two had hauled him to safety. Looking back he saw what he had so narrowly escaped. A score of gleaming wires were uncoiling and falling toward the globe.

"What are we to do about the two down there? We can't leave them to that sort of death! Got any more rope, Aylmer?" cried Burgoyne, staring at the two wretches below, who, crouching close to the in-curving wall of the globe, were trying to evade a perfect rain of wires which were descending upon it.

"Help! For God's sake, help!" they screamed in a frenzy of terror, and there was very good reason for even such fears as theirs. For already, not far off, Kobloth had seen several of the bat-like creatures captured, and drawn up by the wires, and heard their shrieks of agony abruptly silenced as their captors presumably devoured them immediately. The ladder, of course, had been ripped away and aloft, as though it were no more than pack-thread.

"Look out for the rope!" warned Burgoyne, flinging an end of the line Carscadden had snatched from a handy cleat by the doorway. "Only one of you at a time—it won't bear more than that!"

Both men clutched the rope together and clung to it fiercely.

"Let go, one of you!" shouted the scientist angrily. The clawed and hooked wires were hovering near them, and frantic with terror neither of the unfortunate men would relinquish his grip.

"Let go! One must die—or both!" shouted Burgoyne, as a wire with a fiery red star at the end of it was cast by a Martian toward them. The crack of a revolver rang out behind him; Carscadden had fired at the car above. The shot took effect, apparently, for the fiery red star at once fell harmlessly to the red sand.

With a frenzied strength the Austrian snatched his companion's grip from the rope, and shouted, "Haul up! He shall die first," and as he shouted he sprang with astounding agility high up and caught the line far up its length. But Whipps, too, made a desperate leap—a leap to evade a fiery star that swung toward him.

He was too late; the point of light fell on his shoulder. With a wild cry of agony he fell back on the sand, his face and body contorted horribly, as one electrocuted. In a flash a clawing wire had seized him, and his rigid body was hauled aloft into the network of cables. In a moment Kobloth was dragged inside the globe, and the fear in his eyes was unforgettable.

BURGOYNE had his hand on the door immediately, when the scientist stopped him.

"No! not yet. We must keep it open for a little," he warned him. "We have nearly exhausted our compressed air tanks, and must replenish them before the door is closed. I have already set the electric pumps going—it will not take more than an hour at the outside; but we dare not make a start with nearly empty tanks. Moreover we must try and hold on until daylight."

"Why?" asked his friend in surprize.

"Because before daylight we should be leaving Mars on the side opposite to the earth, and going still farther away from our planet."

"Well, we have our guns and plenty of shells, and may be able to stand the brutes off. But I don't fancy those fiery stars. Is it possible they could electrocute us through the steel walls?" he asked gravely.

"No, I don't think so. Just now we

have the neutralium shell above us, and the outer steel wall is insulated from the inner lining; you remember I thought it advisable in case of electrical disturbances we might encounter. Of course what other offensive resources they have at their command we cannot tell. We can only keep our eyes open, and if we have to start, well, we must chance it," declared Carscadden philosophically. "As for the clawed wires, I have something here that will fix them if they menace us," he added quietly, as he stepped to a near-by chest and extracted from it a couple of short-handled and very large-headed instruments. "These things are carbons, insulated from the handles. When we switch on all the current at our command, the heat of the electric arc between them will be quite considerable. I think it will melt their wires without much difficulty."

"Fine! Here's your chance to experiment—a couple of the infernal things sticking to us just outside the doorway!" cried Burgoyne, as pleased as a boy at the possibility of a really effective offensive.

"Right! Here, get the wire between the carbon points, and I'll switch on the juice," cried the scientist, handing him an instrument.

A moment, and Burgoyne raised a hand in signal. The switch was moved, a flash of vivid light leapt between the points, and instantly the wire was fused and fell apart. At once the second wire was so treated with a like result. At this an excited shrill whistling broke out among the Martians in their cars above.

"That's got them guessing!" cried Burgoyne jubilantly. "Reckon they thought no one knew anything about electricity but themselves."

"Likely, but I'm afraid they've got other things up their sleeves to try out on us yet. However, in another thirty minutes we can close the door and leave them. But we must fight for that thirty minutes. Kobloth had better have his gun back; we can't worry about trifles in such a tight corner," said their captain coolly.

"Thank you, Mr. Carscadden; I'll do my best. I'm quite a fair shot," replied the Austrian gratefully.

"Better get busy," advised old Flint. "Those uglies are trying to throw a net all over us."

True enough, a perfect maze of clawed, disk-ended and star-tailed wires was enmeshing the great globe. Many fell on the neutralium cover, and failed to grip it, but numerous others attached themselves to the uncovered steel half. The four men at once commenced to rain bullets amid their foes, and the cries of rage and pain that answered the volleys told of the damage being wrought. Shortly half a dozen cars and their weird occupants had crashed to the sand; and many of the wires lay broken and tangled. All that came near the door were fused instantly by the carbons, and for a little it seemed as if the battle favored the voyagers. But at the globe's side, away from the door, many disks attached themselves and could not be come at by the defenders; and these began to draw the *Neutralia* along at a good pace. The strength of the wires and their grip must have been enormous, for the globe plowed a deep rut through the sand as though steam winches and giant cables had hold of it. Luckily the door faced the canal, so that they were drawn away from it.

"Another ten minutes," said the scientist anxiously. "Then, night or no night, we must go."

With redoubled fury the revolvers spat their deadly missiles among the besiegers, and car after car came crashing from the high cables. The execution caused even these fearless monsters to

halt their proceedings. Suddenly the globe's movement stopped, the wires were drawn rapidly upward, and the ranks of the enemy parted and left a clear right of way between them. A resonant clang, like the sound of a huge gong, came from the western cliff, and a bright object, flashing along a cable at terrific speed, rushed between the two groups of now silent Martians, and came to a stop directly over the *Neutralia.*

"What now?" cried Burgoyne. "What devils' game is this?"

Even as he spoke, from this new arrival there was let down, by thick wires, a large cylindrical object. Swaying to and fro, as though being carefully adjusted, it finally came to rest exactly opposite and a few feet from the globe's open door. A speck of bluish flame glowed in the center of its only visible end.

"Look out! Close the door!" screamed the Austrian. "That looks like a bomb, with its fuse lit!"

THE scientist, being nearest, reached the closing-lever before his companions. But even while throwing his weight on it, his scientific instincts compelled him to peer forward to obtain one glimpse of this unknown offensive. That little part of a second's delay was his undoing.

Before the steel rod slid home there came a burst of vivid flame from the pointing cylinder, which seemed to shrivel up and vanish as a vast cloud of coal-black vapor poured from it. A dense, stinking, poisonous fog rushed through the narrowing slit left by the closing door, and Carscadden was for an instant immersed in its strangling folds. As the door thudded softly home, he fell to the floor, gasping and insensible.

Burgoyne, who was nearest him, reeled a step away, coughing and choking, but by a strong effort of will recovered sufficiently to drag the scientist farther back in the chamber. Kobloth and Flint too got a taste of the malignant stuff as it wafted about, but were not seriously affected.

"What's to be done?" cried Burgoyne. "Carscadden, I think, will soon recover—he is breathing quite normally again. But heaven knows we should get out of this instantly; and only Carscadden knows anything about this aerial navigation."

"Yes, we must not delay a minute. I understand the registers—we must chance our direction. You can work the wheel, and Flint attend to the captain," replied Kobloth, his technical and scientific training aiding his natural resolute hardihood.

At that moment a terrific crash, as of some heavy body falling on the cover above, filled the globe with a deafening clamor.

"That settles it!" shouted Burgoyne. "We chance it! Are you ready, Kobloth?"

"Go ahead!" cried the Austrian, already at the registers. *"Himmel!* over with the cover!" he ordered impatiently.

The great neutralium cover turned, the swinging platform rocked violently, and the fog-obscured windows of the lower half were hidden; while the uncovered upper lights exposed a cloudy sky, barred by a network of gigantic cables along which hundreds of the Martians moving were visible. A pause, as the cover pushed its way through the sand beneath the globe; a shock, as the globe rocked, then righted itself; then Mars was sinking rapidly away from them. Up through the cables, tearing a great gap in the network as though it were mosquito veiling, soared the *Neutralia,* passing with a roar and a thrill of heat through the Martian atmosphere. And so out into the cold and soundless

night of space it shot, away from Mars, away from the sun, and away from our planet.

8. *Ten Million Miles an Hour!*

"WELL, that's settled," observed Burgoyne philosophically as he locked the wheel. "We are out in space, sure enough, but where bound for I haven't the slightest notion. Still, anything is better than that devilish world we have left behind us."

"At present we are receding from Mars at more than fifty thousand miles an hour, and gaining pace every moment," said the Austrian, consulting the registers. "The cold of space is acting as a tonic to the *Neutralia*. Where we are heading for I cannot say. Some of these instruments, not to mention astronomical navigation, require an expert's handling. We can only hope that Mr. Carscadden will soon recover and be able to take charge again," he added fervently.

Since the awful fate of his companion, the Austrian had seemed a changed man. Possibly he realized that he had taken his life in his hands in the pursuit of his evil and vindictive purposes, and that now he stood alone, one man among three who had every reason to regard him with aversion and distrust. He realized, too, probably far more deeply than Burgoyne and Flint, the hopeless nature of their plight if their captain's stupor did not shortly leave him. The fate of all depended absolutely on the brain of the man who alone of all mankind had made the probing of space possible.

Each of the three men, Kobloth as earnestly solicitous as the others, did his best for the unconscious man, but it seemed as though all their efforts would be unavailing; his whole system must have been saturated with the poisonous draft he had quaffed. Hours passed, and still he remained unconscious; living, breathing, but otherwise inert as a log. Meanwhile the *Neutralia* sped silently on through trackless space, speeding out of the profound abyss where the greater planets swing in their vast and solitary orbits. Already the pointers recording in tens of thousands on the speed registers seemed but faint blurs of shadow on their dials. Already the globe was clear of the long, conical shadow cast by Mars, and the sun was but a small and fiery disk that shone steadily to the eastward in a jet-black sky; while the earth was now a mere speck of dim light hardly discernible.

Forty-eight hours went by in this manner; watching the changeless sky, the humming registers, and attending to the unconscious man. Forty-eight hours of the most intense anxiety; little wonder they slept but in short snatches, and their bloodshot sunken eyes betrayed that the strain was becoming unendurable. Then it happened, the sick man's eyes abruptly opened, and he was staring at his companions quite sanely and naturally.

"What's the matter, Hugh?" he muttered weakly. "I suppose that infernal fog stuff knocked me out. Have you shut the door? What are the Martians doing?" he queried more strongly, his eagerness of spirit fast overcoming his sickness.

"The Martians!" laughed Burgoyne as he bent affectionately and joyfully over his friend. "Don't worry about them. They must be a good many million miles astern by this time. But how do you feel —thirsty? hungry?" he queried anxiously.

"What, you have started?" cried Carscadden, sitting bolt-upright in his surprize. "Why, how long have I been insensible?"

"Just forty-eight hours, though it seems like years," replied his friend with

a heavy sigh of relief. "Thank heaven you are better, and will soon be able to skipper the *Neutralia* again. All I know for certain is that we are somewhere out in space, and the pointers haven't been visible for ages."

"Forty-eight hours!" echoed Carscadden. "Here, give me a hand; I must see to this. Forty-eight hours, and going full steam ahead!" he repeated, as though dazed by the notion.

With a litle assistance, for he was not in any way injured, and the poison seemed to have worked its way completely out of his system, he walked across to his beloved registers, and bent over, studying them earnestly for several moments. When he looked up again, his eyes held a queer expression, an expression of mingled amazement, pride, and consternation.

"Why didn't you move the cover about, and check the speed?" he asked.

"Well, we were in the dark as to your calculations, and were afraid of either falling back to Mars, or into the sun. I reckoned we were safer out here, and Kobloth said there was enough air to last us a month," replied Burgoyne.

"Yes, perhaps you were safer—that cover requires delicate manipulation. But it's high time I woke up. Do you know where we are?" asked the scientist.

"Somewhere out in space. Beyond that I haven't a notion," replied Burgoyne as lightly as though he spoke of a car ride over some new country in his own home state.

"As a matter of fact, and to be more precise, we certainly are out in space. At a rough estimate, we are about ten or eleven hours' run from the planet Jupiter. When you left Mars it was night, and Jupiter being the nearest large planet, you were naturally attracted by it. See, that's Jupiter, over there. I should have thought Kobolth could have told you that," said Carscadden in surprize.

"He's been sleeping for several hours—and that queer star has grown much larger in my watch. I was getting a bit worried about it, to say the truth," declared Burgoyne apologetically.

"No wonder it's been growing larger rapidly. Do you know we are rushing to it at nearly ten million miles an hour? Over 150,000 miles a minute! And as the planet is a little to the eastward of Mars, we have traversed an arc of its orbit, of about six hundred million miles! Does that satisfy your ambitions?"

"That's breaking records!" cried Burgoyne with raised eyebrows. "Since we are so near to this planet Jupiter, why not have a look at it. A few hours more or less cannot make much difference to us, surely."

"Jupiter!" echoed Kobloth and Flint in the same breath. For the two sleepers had now awakened, and had hastened to their captain with many expressions of surprize and relief at his welcome recovery. "Jupiter! Yes, I thought that blazing orb was the huge planet, but I could not credit we had hurtled through space so quickly as all that. Yes, I should like to have a closer look at Jupiter. Does it make much difference to our safety if we hold on for a few hours longer?" and a light came into Kobloth's dark, strong eyes that was not entirely inspired by greed and selfish ambition; for at heart the Austrian was really a scientist, whose evil instincts had been so uncontrolled and dominant that they had wrecked what might have been a notable life.

"No, I don't think it can make much difference to us. I may frankly admit that our chances of hitting the earth again from this vast distance are quite a gamble. But seeing that we have evidence of the stupendous speed the *Neutralia* is capable of, the matter of time

hardly needs to be considered, and the problem of return simply resolves itself into a matter of our ability to evade or turn to our advantage the various centers of attraction we shall encounter," replied the scientist thoughtfully.

And so after a little more discussion it was decided, and the great steel globe was permitted to continue its headlong rush through the black abyss toward the huge orb of Jupiter. That giant of our planetary family, whose diameter exceeds 85,000 miles, whose day is no more than five hours, and night no longer, whose four moons race round his great girth with a speed far in excess of our own placid luminary's sedate behavior, and whose year contains 4,332 of its brief days. Luckily there are no inhabitants to suffer the inconvenience of such things, for the huge orb is, like the sun, still in a gaseous condition, and its heat and light of its own making, though its texture is much more concentrated than the sun's tenuous immensity.

In less than two hours from his recovery Carscadden ordered his friend to reverse the cover, and Jupiter, now a large, glowing disk of fast-increasing brightness, went out of sight beneath them as they dropped with terrific but shortly abating speed toward it. Exactly eleven hours after he emerged from his stupor he gave the command to reverse the cover again.

9. *Near to Destruction*

As it swung back, letting light through the lower windows, the intrepid voyagers saw the giant planet below them, a huge whirling orb of glowing cloudiness, with vast, tormented eddies of superheated gas spinning and leaping within it. Across this expanse of titanic activity a black speck moved quickly.

"The inner moon," explained their captain. "It revolves around the planet in forty-two hours. It is nearly four times as large as our own moon. We shall try and land on it."

Nearer and nearer sank the globe to the huge glowing orb, and distinctly visible were the curious belts of alternately liquefying and vaporizing elements. Steadily it was growing larger and soon it dominated the black sky like a vast crimson sun.

Suddenly a tremendous crash resounded on the globe's exterior, and in a moment it was subjected to a tremendous bombardment, as though batteries of heavy artillery were playing upon it. The globe vibrated and trembled with the incessant blows, and great scratches appeared on the outer surface of the windows. The temperature at once rose considerably, and the globe's occupants panted and perspired with every movement.

Carscadden hastily wrote on a piece of paper and passed it around, for it was impossible to hear a word in that deafening uproar.

"We are passing through a swarm of meteorites," he had written. "They are on their way to Jupiter. I think the *Neutralia* can safely stand it, unless we meet an unusually large fragment. However, we can only carry on and chance to the luck that has so far befriended us."

The supply of missiles seemed inexhaustible, and the bombardment continued for over an hour. But at last, abruptly as it had started, the crashing uproar ceased. Shortly after, on the vast glowing disk a faint scintillation broke out in one particular location. It was the cloud of myriads of meteorites rushing to their destruction, fused into vapor by the friction of their passage through the planet's gaseous envelope.

Now the black speck of the inner moon loomed larger, and it could be seen as a round dark object on the dull fiery

mass of Jupiter. At the command of their captain the cover was tilted a little to shut out somewhat the direct pull of Jupiter.

The *Neutralia,* as though tired after its long voyage, sank down slowly toward the rapidly moving moon. All going well, their paths would soon intersect. Absorbed in watching this satellite, the watchers for a little overlooked the fact that Jupiter had other moons to reckon with. It was Kobloth who first reminded them of their oversight.

"Another moon!" he shouted excitedly, pointing to a side window. "It is coming direct for us — we shall be run down!"

With one hasty glance at the approaching menace, Carscadden leapt to the wheel. Every breath was held as the scientist swung the cover, and it never seemed to move so slowly; for each had seen that the *Neutralia,* dropping now but slowly, was almost directly in the path of this rushing peril. Obviously the satellite would overtake the globe unless it could be moved quickly aside from its present path. Was this to be the end?—to be shattered to fragments by a chance collision with this passing moon? Gradually, under their captain's expert handling, the *Neutralia* came to a standstill, and hung poised in space awaiting the fateful moment. Nearer and nearer rushed the satellite, bulking dark and enormous as it came for them.

"It may miss us," said Kobloth in a low voice, and his face was drawn and haggard.

"I have done all I can do," muttered Carscadden. "We are now isolated from all attraction save that of Jupiter, and we shall begin to fall toward it again directly the satellite has passed—if we live to see it," he whispered under his breath.

NEARER came the hurtling black globe, so near that the men, fearfully watching it, braced themselves for the final second of dissolution. Plunging them into darkness, it hid Jupiter from their view as it passed, and then—light! They lived! The moon had rushed past, though the clearance could not have been expressed in distance; it was a matter of split seconds only.

"That was worse than the Martian spiders!" exclaimed old Flint, wiping the perspiration from his forehead.

"I'm not stuck on another such stunt as that, myself!" agreed big Burgoyne with the deepest conviction.

The landing on the inner satellite was comparatively easy, and they grounded safely on its western edge, where both Jupiter and the distant sun were visible. But there was no landing on that little world for the disappointed voyagers, the test-tubes showing no trace of atmosphere.

"There is no air whatever on this little world—at least none that our tubes can detect. We shall have to remain inside while we do it," announced their captain.

"Do what?" asked Kobloth.

"Make the circuit round Jupiter. We shall have to travel rather slowly; for the cover will need some very fine adjustment to hold our position as we make the circuit," explained the scientist.

"And after that?" queried Burgoyne.

"After that we must try and return to our own planet. I say 'try' because it will be a very difficult task—in fact, a pure gamble. It is only right that you should all be aware of that fact," replied Carscadden gravely.

"You have navigated us safely so far, Aylmer, and I'll put my last cent on your making it. Now I think I'll take a snooze. I haven't had a real nap since you were bowled over. Is there anything

to do, or see, that is more than usually interesting?" said Burgoyne.

"No. We shall remain on this satellite, and be carried round with it. It's not safe to approach any closer. If anything happens I will call you; my long sleep has left me quite fresh, so I shall take a number of photographs," replied the scientist, turning to his array of cameras.

Burgoyne and the Austrian were soon enfolded in their rugs. But Flint, always deeply interested in his master's work, watched and aided him with his cameras. From one of the windows they looked directly down on the heaving, gaseous surface of the monster planet; from another the sun was visible, but appeared little more than a star of intense brilliancy amid a host of other lesser points of luminosity. As the satellite moved round its parent orb, Flint remarked in surprize that it always appeared in the same relative position to them.

"Should have thought it would have gone out of sight," said he, referring to the vast globe.

"But this moon is like our satellite," explained his master. "It always keeps the same hemisphere facing inward—it's a peculiarity moons have."

As the hours sped by they noted that though the huge planet shone with the dull light of its own fiery gases, yet it was markedly brighter where the sunlight fell upon it. It was new, crescent, half, and full, in turns.

Ten hours after their grounding Carscadden made a careful study of his registers and instruments, and afterward was busy for a little while with his pencil. Then he made the following announcement:

"Since we landed, Jupiter, as well as Mars and the earth, has moved and altered its relative position considerably. From here to our planet, in a direct line, is now nearly 700,000,000 miles. Our air supply, I find, will last the four of us just seventy-nine hours; that is using up the compressed stores and the reserve oxygen. That means that we shall have to travel at express speed, in spite of the risk; we have no margin of safety for possible emergencies at the end of our long journey. Your presence, Kobloth, is most inconvenient, not to say dangerous. Three would be able to exist in the *Neutralia* for over a hundred hours. If we can avoid the one danger that I fear, we need not use the ejector door for undesirable passengers." His voice was quite courteous, very grave, and yet hard as granite.

"And that one danger is——?" asked Kobloth, whose face had grown gray and anxious.

"The danger of starting the *Neutralia* at a wrong angle. If we do not go absolutely straight to the earth we shall inevitably be drawn into the sun. And with so small a reserve of air we cannot afford to check our terrific pace in time to avert that fate," replied Carscadden quietly.

"When do we start?" inquired Burgoyne, who was impressed by their leader's quiet statement.

"In half an hour—if we can."

10. An Error of a Decimal

"WHAT'S to hinder us starting?" asked Flint, first voicing the surprize of the three listeners.

"Our path—I have just found that it will take us directly across the path of Jupiter's fourth satellite. In half an hour, when we must cross its path, it will be there, or very nearly so. At least it will be no more than .10513 of its diameter away from the point of intersection. I need not say that the margin is far too narrow for safety."

"Can we not wait, and give it time to pass by?" queried Kobloth.

"Yes, we shall have to. But that means missing our straight line earthward. But we shall have to move as soon as this satellite has passed the critical spot, and even then it will be a mere chance if we miss it," said Carscadden.

"Devil take a planet with four moons!" grumbled the stolid Burgoyne, who seemed by far the least moved of the three listeners.

More waiting in silent suspense; then, eye to telescope, their captain gave the signal. At once the great cover was turned, and the satellite on which it had rested sank from beneath their feet, and they saw passing above them the huge dark ball of the outermost of Jupiter's attendant satellites. Only for a moment was it visible, so rapid was the pace the *Neutralia* at once attained; then they were out in the darkness and emptiness of space, homeward bound—if all went well.

During the following hours there was nothing to mark their progress save the spinning pointers on the speed dials of the register—no sense of movement within or perception of motion without the globe. They were apparently hanging in the center of a vast sphere of jet-black darkness, a sphere dusted with points, and streams, and clusters of starry light; yet each man knew that he was being hurled through this terrible darkness at nearly 10,000,000 miles every sixty minutes, and each man feared that the end of this daring venture would be death.

At last sixty long hours had crawled by. Now the men were inclined to be dull and querulous; for as well as the nerve-racking suspense, the air was more than a little vitiated. For the tanks did not release a fraction more than the amount needful to sustain the vital spark of existence, and the carbon-consuming apparatus did not work altogether satisfactorily.

At the end of the sixtieth hour both Mars and the earth loomed large again, and the sun had regained much of its splendor. It was evident that they would pass Mars at a good distance to one side; and it was also evident that their course would take them a long distance from the longed-for earth, and the *Neutralia* would be governed entirely by the pull of the sun's vast mass.

Carscadden worked out his calculations anew, going a long way back in his formulas to make certain that no loophole of error had evaded him, and it was then that he discovered the little slip in a decimal point—a slip a careless schoolboy might have been guilty of, but quite unlooked for in one who regarded calculus as a mild form of recreation. The discovery hurt his pride far more than the fact of the terrible danger it had led them into. Such a trivial error was as a deadly sin to the scientific mind.

The others, when he told them, did not seem to appreciate the gravity of his confession.

"But a point? I don't see anything to worry about," said Burgoyne a little contemptuously.

"No?" sneered Carscadden with a most unusual bitterness. "I hardly thought you would. Nevertheless I think it has signed our death warrant. When I delayed our departure from Jupiter's inner satellite, it was to allow another of the four moons to pass clear of our course. The clearance I then stated was but .10513 of its diameter. That was an error; it should have been 1.0513. On that footing there would not have been the least danger, and we could have started at the exact second requisite to reach our planet safely. Now we shall most certainly miss it."

"Miss it?" echoed Burgoyne. "But

cannot we stop the *Neutralia,* and make a fresh start?"

"You mean just cruise about until the right moment comes round again. Certainly we could, but for our air supply; long before that moment arrives the supply would have been exhausted. No, it is out of the running; nevertheless we must stop the *Neutralia* at once, as there is just a ghost of a chance that by very careful manipulation we might be able to edge into the gravitational field of the planet Venus—I mean into its effective range so far as we are concerned. But it is only a chance, and a mighty slim one," affirmed the scientist coolly. "However, let us try it. Turn the cover, Hugh," he commanded with decision.

BURGOYNE leapt to the wheel with renewed cheerfulness; it was a relief to be doing something. His nature craved activity, and he became uneasy and irritable when denied such expression of his superabundant energy. But for the first time the wheel seemed very hard to start in motion. Surprized, he put out his full strength and strained at it. Still there was no movement.

"What the devil has come to it?" he exclaimed angrily. "Here, you fellows, give me a hand," he called to his companions hastily, as his face abruptly paled at the thought which had suddenly come to him.

That thought was also known to the three men who flew to his assistance. But no man voiced it. In silence they pulled, pushed, and strained until the perspiration streamed from them. But all in vain—the cover would not budge a single inch!

"Something has happened! We are doomed!" cried Kobloth.

"I am afraid that is the truth," said their captain grimly. "If we fail to move the cover, nothing short of the sun itself can stop us, and we are now isolated from every attraction save his. I ought to have foreseen and prepared for such a misfortune."

"How? What has happened?" asked Flint, incredulous that any misfortune should long defy his master.

"Well, it seems to me that very likely a small meteorite fragment has forced its way between the steel globe and its cover, and so made it jam. Unfortunately we have no means of finding out if this is the case, or combating it if we knew this was the trouble," said Carscadden rather wearily. "If there was any hope of saving ourselves," he continued, "we might prolong existence a little by removing Kobloth. But what is the use, when in a few hours our end is certain—unless we can move the cover? All we can do is to face with resolution the inevitable, as befits men."

"How will it be, this plunge into the sun?" asked Kobloth slowly.

"Instantaneous. At the rate we shall rush into the huge corona of flaming gases we shall be fused into incandescence quicker than a moth is consumed in a furnace," replied the scientist.

Even stolid Burgoyne looked startled. Fused into incandescent vapor in a fraction of a second! It might be merciful and absolutely painless, but it was a singularly unpleasant fate to contemplate.

Ten hours went by. Haggard-faced, breathing heavily in the vitiated air, the four men sat silent, moodily staring into vacancy, and each affecting a stoical indifference he was far from experiencing.

The slave of science, by force of habit their captain made occasional inspections of his dials and registers. A moment ago he had pointed to one of the windows and announced without emotion:

"We are now making 12,000,000 miles an hour. We have passed the earth's orbit already, missing our planet.

See, it is there, like a huge crescent moon! In about another seven or eight hours we shall be in the sun—and the voyage will be ended!"

11. A Last Effort! Venus

"How long will the air supply last?" asked Burgoyne after a little.

"Nearly eight hours, just enough to reach the sun," replied the scientist.

"And if the cover would move, what would you do?"

"Try and land on the planet Venus, Hugh. We should be passing its orbit, and not very far from the planet itself, in another hour," replied his friend.

"Well, here goes for one last effort; I'll either break that gearing or move the blasted thing," declared Burgoyne with a sudden wrath that overstrained nerves are prone to exhibit.

Without a word Kobloth leapt to his feet and joined him, and the two began tugging viciously at the obdurate wheel. The energy and despair inspired every ounce of muscle in the two attackers, and the gearing rattled and trembled under the tremendous strain they subjected it to. Suddenly Burgoyne gave a wild shout; the wheel had seemed to move the merest trifle.

Instantly Carscadden and Flint flung themselves also upon it. This way and that, the four desperate men fought with the gearing, and at once a faint harsh grinding sound was audible below them. It was the cosmic fragment being forced between the steel wall and the cover.

"An ounce more—she's coming!" shouted Burgoyne fiercely.

A loud, rasping, shattering noise, and the wheel spun round with a jerk that sent the men hurtling over one another; hands were bleeding and bodies bruised—but the cover was moving!

"She's free! We've done it!" cried the four men hysterically.

They were quickly on their feet again, and rushed to a window. The sun was now beneath them, and hidden from view, and in the sky overhead shone the earth, a brilliant star, and much nearer another as brilliant, the white disk of Venus. Now but half a million miles distant, it gleamed like a great full moon, a glaring circle of light cut out of a black background. Would they be able to reach it in time, and had it a breathable atmosphere? Each brain was concentrated on these two queries.

"We have barely seven hours' air left, and we must now endeavor to greatly reduce our speed, but our pace is so awful that I cannot be sure we can effect this in time to avail us. But we have this in our favor: the *Neutralia,* isolated from the sun's attraction, will begin to be repelled at once, so saturated with cold has the cover now become; and so near are we to Venus that its pull will be very strong. Between these two forces, both impelling us in the same direction, we may be able to manage. We can do no more now, just wait," declared the scientist impassively.

Minute by minute the time sped by, and still, though with ever lessening velocity, the *Neutralia* sped sunward. Despite the asbestos lining, the heat grew intense. Slowly the white disk of Venus receded. Two hours passed before the register pointers came to rest. For a moment the globe was hanging motionless. Then the pointers again moved; the *Neutralia* had commenced its retrograde movement back toward Venus, and away from the seething cauldron it had been heading for.

RELIEVED from the awful strain of their former peril, the voyagers talked and joked boisterously,

"Any points of interest about this dame Venus?" asked Burgoyne flippantly.

"Only this known with any certainty. Venus lies 24,000,000 miles nearer the sun than the earth, her day is forty minutes shorter than ours, and her year only 224 days long; while her diameter is nearly 400 miles less than the earth's. There is an atmosphere of some description, whether breathable or not we shall soon discover. And a few mountains have been noted, but little is known of the surface. Also she has no moons."

"No moons! Thank heaven for that!" cried Burgoyne fervently.

Little by little the reserves of air and oxygen sank steadily nearer to exhaustion. The *Neutralia* had not yet reached the atmosphere of Venus when their captain announced the end of the seventh hour. Already he spoke, and breathed, with much difficulty. "We are very near the journey's end; in ten minutes we shall be a mere few miles from the surface of Venus. Then either the air is breathable, or ——" and he left the sentence unfinished.

Now the planet loomed gigantic beneath them, blotting out everything save its vastness. A pleasant-hued world it was, shaded and lit by various markings as of land and water, wherever its surface could be glimpsed between heavy cloud masses. It was so near, but so was extinction; the last breath of oxygen had been released, and in a few moments their lungs would be gasping and strangling for lack of it. The three friends turned dull, fierce eyes on Kobloth; but for him the air supply would have been ample and to spare. From the start he had been their evil genius, and had forced himself upon them. It was but simple justice that he should be sacrificed for the common weal, and he had richly earned his fate. Burgoyne and Flint staggered toward him. Himself gasping and choking, the Austrian read his doom in their eyes, and shrank away from them.

At that moment a shrill shriek, that rose to a loud roaring, filled the *Neutralia*.

"Stop!" gasped Carscadden. "We are in the atmosphere. We land in a minute!"

The windows whitened and dulled, and ran with steam as the *Neutralia* fell headlong through the damp cloudy layers, shrieking and glowing with the last remnants of its great pace. Luckily the atmosphere of Venus was extensive and dense and aided in arresting their descent. The roar abated, the windows cleared, and a forest of waving tree-tops was visible beneath. Then with a terrific jar that threatened to loosen every bolt-nut, plate, and rivet, the *Neutralia* struck the ground, rocked violently a little, and then was at rest.

"The test-tube!" gasped the scientist hoarsely.

"The door—if we die for it!" choked Burgoyne as he swung madly on the lever, and before Carscadden could interfere, Kobloth had staggered to the lever also. The great door swung open, and a blast of damp, dense air, chilly by comparison with the fetid air within the globe, but pure as liquid life to the suffocating men, swept upon their faces. They breathed in gulping inhalations—they breathed and lived!

You will not want to miss the interest-packed chapters that bring this story to an end in next month's WEIRD TALES. Reserve your copy at your magazine dealer's now.

Uneasy Lie the Drowned

By DONALD WANDREI

Crossing the lake in a canoe, Morse ran into a horror—a stark, hideous horror that crept over the side of his canoe

HE WATCHED the graying sky anxiously, but without fear, and kept his ears attuned to the gusts of wind that pulled the waves higher. He had made many direct crossings of lakes in the past, alone, both in high riding and heavily laden canoes. This lake was new to him. It was miles across. He did not know its depths and shallows, its lily clusters, beds of weeds, or the way it responded to squalls.

The sky had been clear when he started out. A deep, rhythmic stroke of the paddle, and a twist of the blade. Out and forward. Down and back again. Each time that he brought the paddle astern, an expert drag on the blade kept the canoe on its straight course. It was a simple trick. He could go on for hours, stroking steadily on the right, but midway to his goal, and still unwearied, he switched over to the left.

As often happened in fall along the border lakes, a squall was brewing. A mass of slate-black clouds bloomed out of Canada and swallowed the setting sun. He changed his pace, increased the power of his thrust and pull, sent the canoe skimming more swiftly across the waters.

The lake, hitherto calm, began to spawn groups of nervously racing ripples. The wind chased them in all directions over the surface. They vanished, and left a deceptive tranquillity, until more of the uneasy whirls and lines skittered along. A swell gradually made its presence, in slow undulations, then in an occasional small wave that broke, and always higher swells, and more strongly marked crests.

The water itself, leaf-green at mid-afternoon, darkened as the sun disappeared. The green turned to a sodden blue, and went down to a dull black. And far under that black, four hundred feet and more, lay the solid rock that formed the deep-gouged bed of all these northern lakes. Rock, and the sediment of centuries, saturated logs, perhaps the wrecks of sunken boats and bodies of the drowned for the pike and the muskellunge to forget.

Even the stillness had given way to disturbing sound. The constant, quiet slur of waters divided by the canoe became a slap, at irregular intervals, and with mounting force. The canoe, no longer gliding at even balance, began to rise a little, dip a little, and the lake smacked the fore keel. From the far distance came the advance echo of a mighty rushing howl. The dark mass of pine and spruce that lined the shore, now less than two miles ahead, stirred with mournful unrest. The air grew colder.

During all the summers that Morse Calkins had spent canoeing and hunting, camping and fishing through the lakes and forests of northern Minnesota, he had not until now experienced a doubt of his mastery. His alarm crept up from his heart to his brain because he could not account for the apprehension. He had been lost in the woods, had rescued himself from a capsized canoe, outdistanced forest fires, escaped the charge of a full-grown moose. He had survived many a squall. Yet the germ of an obscure panic haunted him. Less than two miles to the

camp where the three companions of this expedition awaited his arrival.

There came a lull.

As though a gigantic, invisible hand closed over the canoe, it lost momentum.

Instantly aware of the drag, he could not understand it. None of the possible causes that he was familiar with seemed adequate reason. A bed of weeds—there was no shallow here, only bottom hundreds of feet down. An added weight—he had not yet shipped water. The pressure of wind—the wind blew fitfully, not steadily, not enough to retard him. A drift of current—perhaps, but currents were more common to rivers than lakes.

THE canoe lagged further. His senses, alert to every mood of the craft, warned him of pressure astern. For some strange, incomprehensible motive, he kept his eyes glued on the dark forest and the black mountains of clouds ahead. The prow of the canoe tilted upward higher than it should rise to crest a wave.

He stroked suddenly, deeply, the muscles knotting at his shoulders, and the veins rising on his arms, while his knuckles stood out in naked, bony lumps.

The canoe slowed to a standstill. The bow rode still higher. All his strength and power, his hardest paddling, could not move the canoe. He saw the sweat seep from wrinkles at his wrist, but the swart hairs were half erect. Odd. Hot and cold—he couldn't be both.

Morse turned and glared all at once, as if expecting to find someone else in the canoe, someone to curse.

There was no one else in the canoe—yet. But there was a hand clutching the stern, and the fingers of another hand crawled into sight, sliding over the rim. Morse watched them with an expression of detachment. It was almost a silly expression, for the anesthetic of shock had paralyzed him in one instantaneous flood.

A pair of hands—well, why not? A swimmer whom he hadn't noticed—or the exhausted survivor from a boat that had foundered—but the hands wouldn't have inched their way up with so stealthy an approach. These thoughts floated vaguely somewhere in back of his reeling consciousness. No swimmer, no living human being, ever possessed hands of such soapy fatness.

They slid along the side, those plump, bloated fingers, and found a grip. He couldn't make out a trace of knuckles or joints or veins. The nails were entirely missing. Only thick coils remained, like enormously pudgy, gray-white worms.

Above the stern rose a tangle of hair. It was wet, matted. Then the forehead and eyes and face, except that of these there existed only a swollen, fissured blob, the features of one drowned and immersed for months.

To Morse, it seemed that his arms and legs would never carry out his command, that his body drifted through lazy gestures akin to a slow-motion picture. Yet he found himself bringing the oar blade down again and again on those horrific hands. He was not aware of having made a mad lunge forward that almost capsized his craft, or of whirling around and lifting the oar above his head. Only his hammering upon the fingers and head of the corpse, there in all that tumult of wind and waters, formed a positive reality.

He could not pound or pry them loose.

The lips curled around the distended, protruding tongue—an illusion bred of darkness and terror. It couldn't be. Nor the gasped whistle of an inarticulate attempt at speech, like the hiss of steam escaping. He didn't hear it. He couldn't hear it above the rumble and boom of thunder.

Thunder—of course. In the old days, cannon had been fired to roil quiet waters

and bring to the surface bodies of the drowned. The thunder, the roaring, reverberating claps and wild wind over the lake had raised this dead thing from its lodging. The rest was imagination. Mustn't let his nerves go.

He heard a husky, gurgling rattle. Once he had listened to a dying soldier whose message bubbled away upon the bullets that had punctured his lungs. This was a sound more appalling, because of its deliberation, and the words choked on the wind, "Don't, Morse. I came up to see you. I had to see you. I was Pete LeRoy."

Morse didn't know that he shouted. There was frenzy in his voice. It rode the storm. "Go back where you came from! I don't care who you are! I've got to make camp—a storm's coming up—get away from here, damn you! Why don't you go back?"

The oar thudded, slipped off those fat fingers. Morse wondered what insane impulse drove him to talk aloud. You can't talk to the drowned.

"I can't go back, Morse. I've got to know you. I've got to talk to you. I had to come up. You see, my canoe sank and I drowned——"

"No! No! Go down where you belong!" Was that crazed babble his? What made him answer ghost-words that he dreamed?

"I will, but not yet. I drowned by accident, Morse. It shouldn't have happened. I wasn't prepared. I hadn't lived as long as I was supposed to. I ought to have gone on living. If I had, I'd have met you. I'd have become a friend of yours. We would have made plans together. We would have seen a lot of each other."

The thick, blurry speech submerged the gusts that now began to lash the rising waters. Morse wished that the gale would scream down a million-fold louder and blast into oblivion those corrupt words and that hoarse voice.

Morse panted—and he himself found time to doubt if he made such soft, persuasive answer — "I don't want to know you, whatever you are."

"But I want to know you, Morse Calkins. You see, if I hadn't drowned months ago—was it months? I don't remember. Time doesn't mean anything to me now. If I hadn't drowned, if I had managed to get across the lake safely, I'd have known you well by now. So when I felt you pass over me, something tugged me. You pulled me up where I could see you——"

"No! No! I didn't have anything to do with it! Get back!"

"Oh yes, you did, Morse. You compelled me to come up. Pete LeRoy—you never heard the name before, did you?"

"I don't want to hear it again. Let me go. I've got to reach camp before the storm breaks at its worst. Why don't you just let go and drop back?"

"I will, but not yet. I have something to do that I didn't have time to do when I was Pete LeRoy and living. I'm dead now. Maybe I'm not Pete LeRoy. But the part of me that remembers Pete LeRoy knows what he would have done if he'd kept on living. That part of me felt you coming over the surface of the lake. I had to rise up. I had to come as I am, and I'm here as I am, because there's a mission I've got to carry out. It's the same mission that I couldn't carry out when I drowned, but that I must have carried out if I'd gone on living."

Morse was hitting, slashing, jabbing again with the oar. The flat of the blade struck the monstrous head with sickening, mushy thuds. He pried at the rotten fingers, but they slid along the side and

clung as though glued to the withes. He was breathing harshly. The spray that had begun to blow made his own hands slippery, and glistened wetly on the gray-white thing at the stern.

"Please," Morse said thickly, and again, "Go away, go down," and then suddenly his voice went screeching up to a high, thin crescendo, "Let go, damn you! You're dead and drowned! Get down and rot where you belong!"

The fingers, bashed into loathsome pulp by the blows from the oar, curled over like talons. What was left of Pete LeRoy said in the same guttural drawl as before, "Yes, Morse, I'll go when I've accomplished my mission. I've got to go down where I belong, then. I haven't told you why I came. Don't you want to know?"

"You said you had to see me. You've seen me. Isn't that enough? Are you going to hang on till Doomsday?"

"Don't you know why I came? What my mission is?"

"For God's sake, let go!" Morse's voice was getting raw. His howl ended on a sort of piping whistle. His eyes were beginning to glare. He had forgotten the storm. He didn't realize how dark it had become, how blackness came rushing across the lake to merge with the rioting waters. His whole world had narrowed to those pulpy hands and the fat, featureless face that lay under the tangle of hair.

The horrible voice gurgled again, with a noise of drowning, a rattle of death. "It's a strange destiny that drives me, Morse. I don't understand it any more than you do. Sometimes I think I almost know. Then it slips away from me. In the life that I should have lived, I would be here now to kill you."

"To—to—kill——" Morse choked. There was a gagging in his throat that he couldn't gulp away.

"Yes, to kill you. You see, Morse, if I'd gone on living my natural life, I'd have got to know you. We'd have been friends for a while. And then we'd have quarreled and turned bitter enemies. We'd have hated each other as much as we liked each other before. But we'd have tried to suppress our hatred, because we'd have been on this long camping-trip. And then today we'd have started across this lake, and our hatred would have flared into the open, and you'd have made a dive for me, and I'd have knocked you overboard and paddled away, leaving you to drown.

"It's *you* who should have gone down, Morse Calkins, and *I* who should have gone on living."

The slow, creepy speech died away. Morse saw tiny rivers running down the face and the hands from the torrents of rain that now deluged the lake. The wind had stormed up to a gale, and the waves had begun to crash in foaming white-caps. Into the dips dropped the canoe, and slid up the six-foot crests, and shipped the breaking spume.

Morse lurched drunkenly. His eyes felt like flaming coals. His hair was plastered to his scalp. Streams of rain trickled down his face, sloshed down his back, squished into his boots.

The gray-white visitor bobbed with the rise and fall of the canoe. The soft, fat hands did not relinquish their grip. The dead, decaying head stayed always at the stern.

With a cry that was more like a hoarse bleat, Morse dived for the fingers, yammering as he tried to pull them loose. Their touch was a dreadful sensation that made him gag in crazed horror. He beat

and pounded them while the rain glistened like tears on his yellow face.

The double weight on the stern stood the canoe straight on end as it started to mount a roaring white-cap. It plunged beneath the surface. Morse pitched out. The pudgy hands, oddly, seemed to be clinging to his. And then they had somehow enfolded him and he was beating frenziedly at something that had long been pulp.

His last upward glance showed him only raging blackness and the drive of rain.

He was still fighting when the waters closed over his head.

The Keen Eyes and Ears of Kara Kedi*

By CLAUDE FARRÈRE

An odd little story about a cat that was telepathic—by a member of the French Academy

January 13, 1937

I HAVE been writing all the evening, alone in my room, alone in my little house in the uncomprehending city of Toulon, the lonely refuge I have crept into to get away from the world. When a man tires himself out, when he takes too strenuous a part in the various painful agitations of active life, he grows old rapidly. I have not yet lived fifty years on this earth, but my hair is white and my thoughts are as gray as ashes. . . .

I am writing in my room, all alone. Alone in a sense, that is. My black cat is with me. He is asleep, curled up in his armchair, which is an exact duplicate of mine. He and I spend a great deal of time together in these great, heavy twin chairs, upholstered in tan velvet. My black cat's name is Kara Kedi, which is Turkish for just that—I mean, for "black cat." I didn't waste a great deal of imagination in naming him. Kara Kedi was born in Turkey, at Stamboul, in the holy suburb of Eyoub. That was back in the days when I was deep in love with the Circassian girl. Ah, how blond her hair was, and how brown her skin was! And how sweet her kisses were!

But there is no burning passion in my cottage tonight. Kara Kedi's chair is comfortable, and he sleeps very soundly, so that I am really alone in my room, alone in my dreary little house.

My little house is a gimcrack of a place, with a little garden that runs all around it. To the right and left are little gardens very much like mine, about tiny little houses very much like mine. My neighbor on the right is a very dirty, very polite, and very deaf old sailor. My neighbor on the left is a pretty little young woman, very charming and very candid, who is constantly laughing and

* Translated by Roy Temple House.

rattling her bracelets, as she gambols about in her sunny little garden. She has a great many friends, all of them gentlemen, and I am afraid they do not all come merely for the sake of a look at her pretty face and the pleasure of hearing her silvery voice. But of course it isn't any affair of mine what they come for. And they are reasonably quiet about it, so that I scarcely know when they come and go.

At night, our part of the city is absolutely quiet. It is so still at night that even when the sea is calm I can hear it lapping lazily against the rocks. For the sea is not many feet away from me. I could see it from my windows, if my windows were not so low. But as it is, the cabins of the fishermen's families hide the sea away from me.

But tonight, for some reason or other, I can't hear a sound of any sort, not even the caressing whispers of the waves. It is too calm even for that. There is not a hint of a breeze in the air, not a ripple on the surface of the sea. The winds and the waves are asleep, quite as soundly asleep as Kara Kedi, my black cat.

Kara Kedi, in his velvet-upholstered armchair, is as completely motionless as if he were cast in bronze. I can't see his paws or his tail, or the exact shape of his head. He is rolled up into a tightish ball, with a soft outline of ink-colored fur. Kara Kedi is an enormous cat. I think he is probably the biggest cat I ever saw. You could scarcely call him fat. He is not one of those round, formless cats you see sometimes, who doze day and night because they have more fat flesh than they have energy. He is longer, larger-boned, taller on his feet, than the ordinary house-cat. When he crosses my garden, gravely, gracefully, but with unmistakable evidence of personality and power, to meditate in the branches of the great fig-tree at the end of my garden, my little neighbor on the left says he makes her nervous. She tells me that she is almost afraid of him, and since her zoological attainments are not extensive enough to include black panthers, she reproachfully calls him a big awful bear.

I AM writing at this journal of mine . . . there is a great feeling of calmness and peace about me in the room and in the house . . . in the garden, and in all the quiet night that reaches out beyond. . . .

I discover that my pen is empty. I raise my head and reach out my hand, for the inkwell . . . Ah! Kara Kedi is not asleep any longer. His head has suddenly emerged from the placid ball of dark fur. His head moves upward and forward, and his glaring eyes fix themselves on the dim rectangle of the window. And I can see that his pointed ears have turned straight upward. He is listening with all his might.

"Kara Kedi, old fellow, is there something wrong out beyond that window?"

Kara Kedi is still motionless and silent. But I can see his ears twitch, in a gesture that tells me he has heard me, but implores me to be quiet. He is right. There is no reason why I should distract his attention from the faint and distant noises which may mean much, by the noisy futilities of human speech. . . .

They *do* mean much, I am sure of that. Something is wrong, mysteriously wrong. Kara Kedi rises upright on his four long, strong legs, his head held straight forward and his long tail standing straight out behind him. He has disdained the thousand-year tradition of cats awakened from a nap. He has not stopped to arch his back, to yawn, to stretch himself magnificently. There must be something ominous in the air, or at least it must

seem ominous to Kara Kedi . . . perhaps it might seem less so to me. . . .

It *is* a serious matter in Kara Kedi's opinion; there is no longer any doubt about that! Kara Kedi descends from the armchair and walks toward the window. He walks resolutely, determinedly, like a strong nature meeting a crisis. When he left his chair, he did not leap down from the chair to the floor. He lengthened himself out, muscle after muscle, until he touched the floor with one paw, then with a second, then with a third, and a fourth. . . . I realize perfectly by this time that I must maintain an absolute silence. Kara Kedi's head moves forward till his nose touches the strangely disquieting window-pane. Then, very slowly, the great body swings around till it faces toward the wall which lay to the animal's left before. My windows are so low that I can see the great panther-profile now, standing out rather distinctly against the faint light of the window. I should not be able to see him so distinctly if the animal's hair had not suddenly risen to a perpendicular all over his body and begun, as I had seen it do once or twice before on very stormy days, to emit a myriad of tiny crackling electric sparks.

"Kara Kedi! Kitty! What's the matter with you?"

"Miau!"

It was not Kara Kedi's usual "miau" of inquiry, petition or complaint; it was merely an expression of impatience. Kara Kedi, so courteous on most occasions, is nervously irritated at my foolish prattle. I accept his rebuke, in all meekness. I shall not breathe another sound.

Kara Kedi's eyes are fixed on that left wall with glaring insistence. The eyes are two green flames of dazzling glory. All at once the great feline turns his head and gazes at me, and—it sounds supremely foolish—and I am unable to ward off a feeling of superstitious, dazed terror. I am as sure as Kara Kedi is that something ghastly is happening out beyond that wall. It is a feeling, nothing more. There is no trace of rational knowledge. . . .

Kara Kedi, phosphorescent from his tail to his mustache, moves entirely away from the window. Then he begins to creep straight along that left wall, as if he were following, step by step, some unknown being which moved or was moved slowly along on the other side of the wall. Kara Kedi is making no apparent use of his sense of smell. He is listening with all the intense keenness of his ears, and he is looking, looking with all his eyes. . . . The wall is covered with a plain gray paper, and I can't remember ever to have seen anything on that wall or that paper which had anything unusual about it. . . .

Oh—oh!

Kara Kedi draws himself together, and with all the power of his marvelous muscles he flings himself backward into the room, away from the wall. He runs around in a bewildered circle, his tail thrust out perfectly stiff. He looks this way and that for a place to flee to. I can see that he is driven by blind and agonizing terror. He is so troubled that his mind and his memory are not functioning; he has forgotten that I am there to guard and protect him as I have done so many times before. It is only after a long period of anguish and dashing madly hither and thither, that his dazed eyes chance to meet mine. The message of my presence reaches his poor fuddled brain at last. And suddenly, like an animal hunted for prey, he flings himself toward me, he leaps to my knees, but he does not stop there. He crawls deep into my arms, up against my breast. He buries his head between my neck and my shoulder, but he is unable to resist the wretched fascination that keeps drawing

his eyes toward that miserable wall, that wall of pain and horror.

And his trouble has taken possession of me. The frightened cat has driven his fear into the very marrow of my bones. I am paralyzed with craven foreboding. Like the cat, I am unable to move my eyes from the mysterious gray wall, the wall which is hiding from me some blood-curdling happening that I have not the courage to try to imagine. Kara Kedi trembles and shivers in the protecting grasp of my two cold hands. Then suddenly an even more terrible thing happens.

Kara Kedi tears himself free from my embrace, drops from my knees, leaps into the air three or four times and falls to the floor in violent convulsions. His throat is torn by raucous cries, cries which are no more like the familiar miauing of his normal life than the sinister gurglings of an epileptic in the midst of a seizure are like the healthy human voice. . . .

* * * * *

I think I suffered a temporary period of derangement. I have a feverish recollection that I seized my revolver and stood a long time with the weapon pointed at the ominous wall, waiting for the wall to open and admit some shape of terror. . . .

Jan. 14.

MY POOR, pretty young neighbor, the giddy little person of accommodating virtue whose bracelets rattled so gayly in her sunny garden, is dead. They found her body this morning.

Nobody has the slightest inkling of what the motive of the crime may have been. The assassin does not appear to have taken anything. The poor little corpse still wears all its gaudy jewelry. Nor was there any sign of a struggle or of violence. An extraordinarily long gold pin, an ornament but a deadly weapon at need, was found driven into her body below the fifth rib. And the eyes of the dead woman, wide open and staring, are dilated with a horror that is one of the most dreadful things I have ever seen.

Everybody is mystified. Nobody saw anything, nobody heard anything. It is likely that the mystery will never be solved. Till the body was found, nobody had any suspicion that anything was wrong.

Nobody, that is, but Kara Kedi—Kara Kedi and I.

Kara Kedi followed me over when I went into the little cottage to look at the body. He glanced carelessly at the pathetic little corpse; then he looked away. It appears that dead people have no particular interest for Kara Kedi. But he did look at me again, with a strange earnest expression in his eyes.

Then he walked out of the open door, crossed the garden pensively, and moved out on a branch of the great fig-tree to meditate. To meditate — perhaps to ruminate his memories.

Fragment

By ROBERT E. HOWARD

And so his boyhood wandered into youth,
And still the hazes thickened round his head,
And red, lascivious nightmares shared his bed
And fantasies with greedy claw and tooth
Burrowed into the secret parts of him—
Gigantic, bestial and misshapen paws
Gloatingly fumbled each white youthful limb,
And shadows lurked with scarlet gaping jaws.

Deeper and deeper in a twisting maze
Of monstrous shadows, shot with red and black,
Or gray as dull decay and rainy days,
He stumbled onward. Ever at his back
He heard the lecherous laughter of the ghouls.
Under the fungoid trees lay stagnant pools
Wherein he sometimes plunged up to his waist
And shrieked and scrambled out with loathing haste,
Feeling unnumbered slimy fingers press
His shrinking flesh with evil, dank caress.

Life was a cesspool of obscenity—
He saw through eyes accursed with unveiled sight—
Where Lust ran rampant through a screaming Night
And black-faced swine roared from the Devil's styes;
Where grinning corpses, fiend-inhabited,
Walked through the world with taloned hands outspread;
Where beast and monster swaggered side by side,
And unseen demons strummed a maddening tune;
And naked witches, young and brazen-eyed,
Flaunted their buttocks to a lustful moon.

Rank, shambling devils chased him night on night,
And caught and bore him to a flaming hall,
Where lambent in the flaring crimson light
A thousand long-tongued faces lined the wall.
And there they flung him, naked and a-sprawl
Before a great dark woman's ebon throne.
How dark, inhuman, strange, her deep eyes shone!

Polaris

By H. P. LOVECRAFT

The watcher could not tell which was dream and which was reality—a brief weird fantasy by a late master of eery fiction

INTO the north window of my chamber glows the Pole Star with uncanny light. All through the long hellish hours of blackness it shines there. And in the autumn of the year, when the winds from the north curse and whine, and the red-leaved trees of the swamp mutter things to one another in the small hours of the morning under the horned waning moon, I sit by the casement and watch that star. Down from the heights reels the glittering Cassiopeia as the hours wear on, while Charles' Wain lumbers up from behind the vapor-soaked swamp trees that sway in the night wind. Just before dawn Arcturus winks ruddily from above the cemetery on the low hillock, and Coma Berenices shimmers weirdly afar off in the mysterious east; but still the Pole Star leers down from the same place in the black vault, winking hideously like an insane watching eye which strives to convey some strange message, yet recalls nothing save that it once had a message to convey. Sometimes, when it is cloudy, I can sleep.

Well do I remember the night of the great aurora, when over the swamp played the shocking coruscations of the demon light. After the beam came clouds, and then I slept.

And it was under a horned waning moon that I saw the city for the first time. Still and somnolent did it lie, on a strange plateau in a hollow betwixt strange peaks. Of ghastly marble were its walls and its towers, its columns, domes, and pavements. In the marble streets were marble pillars, the upper parts of which were carven into the images of grave bearded men. The air was warm and stirred not. And overhead, scarce ten degrees from the zenith, glowed that watching Pole Star.

Long did I gaze on the city, but the day came not. When the red Aldebaran, which blinked low in the sky but never set, had crawled on a quarter of the way around the horizon, I saw light and motion in the houses and the streets. Forms strangely robed, but at once noble and familiar, walked abroad, and under the horned waning moon men talked wisdom in a tongue which I understood, though it was unlike any language I had ever known. And when the red Aldebaran had crawled more than half-way around the horizon, there were again darkness and silence.

When I waked, I was not as I had been. Upon my memory was graven the vision of the city, and within my soul had arisen another and vaguer recollection, of whose nature I was not then certain. Thereafter, on the cloudy nights when I could sleep, I saw the city often; sometimes under the hot, yellow rays of a sun which did not set, but which wheeled low around the horizon. And on the clear nights the Pole Star leered as never before.

Gradually I came to wonder what might be my place in that city on the strange plateau betwixt strange peaks.

At first content to view the scene as an all-observant uncorporeal presence, I now desired to define my relation to it, and to speak my mind amongst the grave men who conversed each day in the public squares. I said to myself, "This is no dream, for by what means can I prove the greater reality of that other life in the house of stone and brick south of the sinister swamp and the cemetery on the low hillock, where the Pole Star peeps into my north window each night?"

One night as I listened to the discourse in the large square containing many statues, I felt a change; and perceived that I had at last a bodily form. Nor was I a stranger in the streets of Olathoe, which lies on the plateau of Sarkia, betwixt the peaks of Noton and Kadiphonek. It was my friend Alos who spoke, and his speech was one that pleased my soul, for it was the speech of a true man and patriot. That night had the news come of Daikos' fall, and of the advance of the Inutos; squat, hellish yellow fiends who five years ago had appeared out of the unknown west to ravage the confines of our kingdom, and many to besiege our towns. Having taken the fortified places at the foot of the mountains, their way now lay open to the plateau, unless every citizen could resist with the strength of ten men. For the squat creatures were mighty in the arts of war, and knew not the scruples of honor which held back our tall, gray-eyed men of Lomar from ruthless conquest.

Alos, my friend, was commander of all the forces on the plateau, and in him lay the last hope of our country. On this occasion he spoke of the perils to be faced, and exhorted the men of Olathoe, bravest of the Lomarians, to sustain the traditions of their ancestors, who when forced to move southward from Zobna before the advance of the great ice sheet (even as our descendants must some day flee from the land of Lomar), valiantly and victoriously swept aside the hairy, long-armed, cannibal Gnophkehs that stood in their way. To me Alos denied a warrior's part, for I was feeble and given to strange faintings when subjected to stress and hardships. But my eyes were the keenest in the city, despite the long hours I gave each day to the study of the Pnakotic manuscripts and the wisdom of the Zobnarian Fathers; so my friend, desiring not to doom me to inaction, rewarded me with that duty which was second to nothing in importance. To the watch-tower of Thapnen he sent me, there to serve as the eyes of our army. Should the Inutos attempt to gain the citadel by the narrow pass behind the peak Noton and thereby surprize the garrison, I was to give the signal of fire which would warn the waiting soldiers and save the town from immediate disaster.

Alone I mounted the tower, for every man of stout body was needed in the passes below. My brain was sore dazed with excitement and fatigue, for I had not slept in many days; yet was my purpose firm, for I loved my native land of Lomar, and the marble city Olathoe that lies betwixt the peaks of Noton and Kadiphonek.

But as I stood in the tower's topmost chamber, I beheld the horned waning moon, red and sinister, quivering through the vapors that hovered over the distant valley of Banof. And through an opening in the roof glittered the pale Pole Star, fluttering as if alive, and leering like a fiend and tempter. Methought its spirit whispered evil counsel, soothing me to traitorous somnolence with a damnable rhythmical promise which it repeated over and over:

Slumber, watcher, till the spheres,
Six and twenty thousand years
Have revolv'd, and I return
To the spot where now I burn.
Other stars anon shall rise
To the axis of the skies;
Stars that soothe and stars that bless
With a sweet forgetfulness:
Only when my round is o'er
Shall the past disturb thy door.

Vainly did I struggle with my drowsiness, seeking to connect these strange words with some lore of the skies which I had learned from the Pnakotic manuscripts. My head, heavy and reeling, drooped to my breast, and when next I looked up it was in a dream; with the Pole Star grinning at me through a window from over the horrible swaying trees of a dream swamp. And I am still dreaming.

In my shame and despair I sometimes scream frantically, begging the dream-creatures around me to waken me ere the Inutos steal up the pass behind the peak Noton and take the citadel by surprize; but these creatures are demons, for they laugh at me and tell me I am not dreaming. They mock me whilst I sleep, and whilst the squat yellow foe may be creeping silently upon us. I have failed in my duty and betrayed the marble city of Olathoe; I have proven false to Alos, my friend and commander. But still these shadows of my dreams deride me. They say there is no land of Lomar, save in my nocturnal imaginings; that in these realms where the Pole Star shines high, and red Aldebaran crawls low around the horizon, there has been naught save ice and snow for thousands of years, and never a man save squat, yellow creatures, blighted by the cold, whom they call Eskimos.

And as I writhe in my guilty agony, frantic to save the city whose peril every moment grows, and vainly striving to

(Please turn to page 759)

Laocoon*

By BASSETT MORGAN

AS THE little trading-schooner drew nearer the shadowy fringes of the island, the talk on deck fell to silence. The tropic beauty of Papua was strangely repellent. Willoughby, who had impulsively answered the offer of Professor Denham to spend a year or so helping the scientist in his investigation in deep sea lore off these shores at a sal-

* From WEIRD TALES for July, 1926.

ary of three thousand dollars a year, rather regretted his acceptance. He felt as if mysterious tentacles of miasmic jungle swamps breathed poison in the perfume-laden off-shore wind. It was like the breath of a black panther. He took Professor Denham's letter from his pocket and read it again.

Five years before, Willoughby had been a student under Professor Denham in the University of California, and had gained a name for himself as a football star. He had regretted the circumstances which prompted Professor Denham to resign the chair of science under the storm of ridicule and protest resulting when a newspaper featured the scientist's assertion that sea-serpents really existed. The article was illustrated by a cartoon of Professor Denham and Chueng Ching, a Chinese student who was his especial protegé and devoted to Denham, in the coils of a serpent labeled "Public Opinion," depicting the agony of the Laocoon. There was the account of class experiments in transplanting the brain of one rat to the head of another, and of the practical joke perpetrated by a student assistant in substituting the brain of a female rat for that of a male, which led to riotous speculation on the campus as to the outcome of the experiment.

Willoughby had been sorry for Professor Denham. It was, however, the three thousand dollars salary that decided him to accept Denham's offer and take the next steamer from San Francisco east, re-embarking on a trading-schooner for Papua, and Denham was to send a boat to take him to his own habitation.

The letter, which he re-read within sight of landing, had emphasized the necessity of "a strong fearless man, without nerves." Willoughby interpreted the phrase with a new meaning, now that he recognized the repellent fascination of Papua.

He had no sooner stepped ashore than a Chinese in oil-stained dungarees approached him and spoke:

"You allee samee Mista Will'bee, you come 'long my boat."

He had scant time to bid farewell to his acquaintances of the trading-vessel when he was led to a launch lying on water so clear that she seemed to be floating on air. Her propeller churned foam and she careened a little as they rounded the point; then for hours the launch raced along the coast, where jungles brooded and river mouths showed no banks, but only trees rooted in swamp. Fighting a loneliness he could not analyze, Willoughby watched sea gardens beneath and tried to reason away a lowering depression. The Chinese ignored his tentative approaches to conversation by unbroken and stoical silence.

In the late afternoon, with her engines slowed to half-speed, the launch entered a lagoon, where echoes of her pulsations disturbed boobies on the wreck of an old ship pronged on coral spurs. The lagoon water held gaudy little fish scattering like sparks between skeleton-white roots of drowned trees. Sea life had made the wreck its prey. White decay crept up her sides and she was rooted to abysmal depths by weeds. A small wharf sagged under forest creepers with tendrils trailing in the sea. The planks creaked alarmingly as Willoughby trod them following the boatman, and met the shrill hum of insects. The heat was like a furnace blast. He was aware of a throb like *tic-douloureux* pulsing incessantly, as if on distant hills the heat had a voice.

What had once been a path leading from the wharf was now overgrown. The Chinese, lathered with sweat, slashed with a knife at trailing vines. Orchids quivered like flames. The incessant hum of insects rose in loud crescendo, but as they progressed the trail became less con-

fused with looped lianas. Sunlight filtered through branches overhead. And ever nearer came that slow beat of sound, touching nerve centers as insistently as the insect humming irritated the ear-drums.

Then the jungle was ended and Willoughby saw a bamboo palisade enclosing ground that had once been cleared and under cultivation; yet the jungle, beaten back, had swarmed again, choking the garden, creeping over the palisade and the crushed coral walk which led to a substantial dwelling with nipa-thatched roof and a vine-covered pergola leading to shore rocks which rose abruptly at one side. It was then that Willoughby understood that diapason of sound, the shock of outer seas breaking in subterranean caverns.

THE Chinese who had guided him did not enter the gate, but darted beside the palisade. Willoughby heard no sign of human presence save the "shir-rr" of his boot-soles on the coral. Then a Chinese wearing the white ducks of a house-boy appeared in a doorway cut through luxuriant bougainvillea vines purple with bloom. He stood staring at Willoughby, with his hands twisting together. For a moment Willoughby felt again that sense of helplessness bred by the jungle, the fear of encroaching death.

"Tell your boss-man that Willoughby is here," he said.

He followed the Chinese into the house. The large living-room was shaded and cool. Chinese matting covered the floor. Sea-grass chairs offered ease. There were wall cases filled with labeled specimens of sea denizens, a table holding a typewriter and note-book and some loose pages of script. The house was clean and orderly, yet he still felt as if the jungle lay too close for safety.

"Boss-man, he come bimeby," ventured the Chinese plaintively.

"Where's Chueng Ching?" Willoughby knew the Chinese student had accompanied Denham to his retreat and, it was rumored, provided funds for the scientist.

"Him gone long time. I not know much." The reply brought a grimace from the house-boy, as of apprehension.

"You got one piecee ship, I go out 'longside," he added plaintively, then darted back at the sound of steps, as Professor Denham entered.

Willoughby was shocked at the change in him. Denham's skin seemed stretched over his bones, his eyes shone like those of a madman, the hand extended to Willoughby felt cold and lifeless as that of a corpse in spite of tropic heat.

"Glad you arrived, Willoughby," he said. "You've come too late to see Chueng Ching today, but he'll be here tomorrow. We'll eat, then you can rest. You'll excuse me if I write a few notes right away. I've just come from Chueng Ching and I must get them down at once."

Willoughby was a little surprized, but he followed the house-boy to a room with a bed screened by netting, took off his shoes, collar and coat and dropped on the cotton covering and dozed. He was awakened by the clink of dishes. In the living-room a table was set for two, but Denham did not appear.

The house-boy hovered near, serving Willoughby eagerly, and when the coffee was brought voiced again his wistful plea, "You got one piecee ship, I go out 'longside."

He seemed to hang on Willoughby's answer. Plainly the Chinese was in the grip of fear, and the white man remembered again the encroaching jungle and the derelict rooted to sea gardens. He wished Denham would return, and went

on the porch to look for his host. He did not mind the lack of courtesy, but the silence and oppression were affecting his nerves. Tropic night had fallen, the mosquitoes were vicious. Beyond the murmur of sea caverns he heard nothing, and returned to the house, to look at the specimens in wall cases, then to reach the typewriter stand where he glanced at a sheet still in the carrier. Without consciousness of reading something not intended for him, Willoughby glanced at the typing in view:

"There is now no doubt but that physical coarseness of the beast has absorbed the fine mentality of Chueng Ching. I fed him double the usual amount of chicken yesterday, and he was in a fine rage for more. His roarings are bestial. The pool was lashed to foam by his fury. And I am assured that his rage was directed toward me, his friend and companion. It is scarcely a year since he was sorrowful at the thought that I should die before he died and leave him alone. Now he is all brute and I am punished. He no longer heeds my voice . . ."

As if the writer had been interrupted at his task, the sentence was left unfinished. Willoughby read with mingled rage and horror. Evidently Chueng Ching had gone insane and he had been hired to care for a madman. He resented it. Yet he was virtually a prisoner on the island unless he could find the boatman who brought him. He stood a moment, wondering what to do. The little house-boy lingered near him constantly without giving the impression of watching, but shook his head when Willoughby demanded to see Denham.

"No can do," he said plaintively.

Willoughby went through the curtained doorway into a room evidently belonging to Chueng Ching, to judge by the embroidered tapestries moving in the draft. Chests of carved teak stood between wall cases. A table held metal tubes, with sealed ends and addressed to the Royal College at Pekin. Willoughby heard the squawking of hens and ran outside into the pergola of vines. A lantern stood beside a bamboo coop and Professor Denham was wringing the neck of a hen and tossing it on the ground while he reached for others. He looked at Willoughby, and it seemed to him that Denham's eyes held mingled fear and madness.

Then he heard the sound of water threshed as if by storm, although there was no wind and not a leaf of the vines stirred.

"Chueng Ching," said Denham. "Hungry again. Such gluttony! I wish you'd arrived earlier, but it's difficult to see him at night. Go into the house, Willoughby, and read those notes you'll find. I'll return presently and tell you all about him."

Denham gathered the slaughtered hens and darted down the vine-covered passageway of the pergola. There was the sound of an iron door banged shut, the repeated noise of water threshed violently, and Willoughby returned to the house, where he took up the typed script, arranged the pages according to numbers and glanced over them. Fear, horror, fascination held him. He forgot where he was. He was unaware of the house-boy standing mute near his chair, seeking companionship in a fear that was sapping his life. Willoughby sat on the edge of his chair, hair slowly rising, scalp prickly, his palms moist with cold sweat.

"I HAVE now the evidence that ocean depths are a desert of ice-cold water with no living organism; soundless, still, dark nothingness. A ship sinking to those depths would cease to be, ground into molecules on the ocean bed. The silence must be fearful. But greatest satis-

faction of all is the proving of my theory that sea-serpents, as they are popularly called, do exist, and that their armor of scales and longevity has preserved some of them to this day. The cavern pool is an ideal spot for such a sea denizen to lurk. Chueng Ching told me that he had heard rumors of this haunted cavern, when we were both in California, and he is as delighted as I, that we have found the thing, and my years of research are rewarded. . . .

"It is three months since I added to this diary. Chueng Ching is despondent. The white spot which he tells me has been spreading for a year is only too plainly evidence of leprosy. Chueng Ching is accursed, doomed to a lingering death, a tragedy for both of us. He feels it keenly because we have found what we sought, and for him there will not be time to pursue the study of the sea-serpent. We spoke, last night, of the restrictions of man's limited span of life, the pity that we are not given enough years, even centuries, for research. One envies the sea-serpent, which is undoubtedly older than whales, older than the sequoias of California, much older than the Christian era. To judge by his length and the size of his armor plates, our dragon is centuries old. I said to Chueng Ching that I wished I could inhabit his body, and not only live indefinitely but also explore the ocean depths, learn his manners of living and perhaps find his relatives. Chueng Ching seemed startled rather than amused. . . .

"Two months later. This morning Chueng Ching asked a terrific thing of me. He pleaded the growing decay of his flesh. His fingers are already numb. He believes that I could give him the magnificent body and strength of our sea-serpent, a thought suggested no doubt by those experimental tamperings of mine in college surgery, substituting the brains of one rodent for those of another. But I could not do such a thing. Chueng Ching is a man, a brother to me, a fine mentality, a higher organism."

Willoughby ripped open his shirt, longing for a cooling breath on his skin. The shadow of the house-boy fell across his feet; the brown hands were twisting mutely. The page he had just read fell to the floor, and he seized the next.

"Chueng Ching has worked out an arrangement by which he is confident we can manage the operation. The steel net will confine the sea-serpent, a collar of steel will hold his head while I shoot ether from a spray-gun. The bench, the instruments, the cauterants, are ready. Only, I am afraid. If it were not that Chueng Ching's fingers and toes are already sloughing away, I could not do this thing. He pleads all day, and moans all night. Tomorrow I shall be alone save for the house-boy Wi Wo and the boatman who is hired to call here at regular intervals."

There was the rustling of the page which Willoughby crushed in tense fingers as he took it up, and the sound of his heavy breathing.

"Chueng Chin wakened with a great fear, although he assures me that he went under the anesthetic not only reconciled but even rejoicing in a resurrection of which he felt surer than I did. He felt no pain, only fear and the sense of a great weight dragging him down. No doubt the serpent body is not yet under control of nerve telegraphy of the mind. I attribute his fear to the same cause. Time will cure both troubles. Today, I made out the first of his attempts to communicate with me. There is no doubt he speaks, but I scarce understand his words, roared in that tremendous voice. I spent hours with him, and had Wi Wo fetch my meals. I asked questions to which he could reply by a nod or shake of his great

crested head. What a pity those fools who ridiculed my assertions that sea-dragons do exist, cannot see this triumph!

"The vitality of Chueng Ching's body is prodigious. He revived quickly from the ether. The leprous shell of my poor friend is in the ocean depths, sewn in canvas, weighted with iron. The sea will sing a requiem. But Chueng Ching is now invulnerable and magnificent. Nothing could harm that marvelously constructed coat of mail unless it is some device of man, the destroyer."

Willoughby lifted his head and brushed his hand across his eyes. He was entering into horror that chilled his flesh, a nightmare he could not and would not believe. He abominated the crime of Denham, yet was fascinated.

"He will not take meat, yet we fed the sea-serpent he now inhabits, at regular intervals, on raw flesh. But since the change Chueng Ching will not touch it. No doubt the higher mentality of an esthete has subjugated the beast body. Today I prepared another roll of notes for the Royal College of Pekin, a rare collection of data which will receive consideration from Chinese savants that I could not wrest from my own people. Chueng Ching and I have proved the existence of sea-dragons and the ability of science through martyrdom to penetrate to the mysteries beneath the waters."

WILLOUGHBY mopped his face. Wi Wo held a tray toward him and he took a bottle it held and poured himself a peg of brandy, then seized the next page.

"Chueng Ching is timid of the dark. His fear throttles our investigations. And much that he would impart is lost through my faulty understanding of his articulation. The curse of Babel rings down the ages. He breaks into Cantonese in his endeavor to enlighten me. The finer details would be invaluable, but I hoped too greatly. I cannot understand his fear, and his rather pathetic regret at the loneliness he will find when I am dead. But one thing comforts me: he is taking food, and prefers rather undercooked chicken and pork. I must keep a stock on hand, as his appetite is prodigious. . . .

"Six months since I last wrote these notes. Chueng Ching has furnished me with priceless specimens and data of the ocean depths, the notes of which I seal daily in metal tubes to be sent to Pekin. But I notice a change in him. While at first he was afraid of the depths, he now goes fearlessly and remains for a longer period each time. The silence down there must be fearful, but he seems to like exploring, and has even identified geographic indentations of continent shores, and recognizes the chill of polar seas. . . .

"Three months from my last entry. Another period of change has come over Chueng Ching. The little fish spewed from his jaws are spoiled by carelessness. Things are not going so well. There is a change of temperament and his articulation is thick. For a time he spoke clearly, although in a voice like a church organ. Now he roars in sullen rage when I refuse to feed him before I obtain an account of his wanderings. I believe it was a mistake to feed him flesh. Better to have left him to find sea-food only. I wonder if the brute body is in ascendance, or if meeting other monsters of his own kind has upset him. He would know no means of communication with them, and no methods of defense, but what a spectacle it would be to view a battle of sea-dragons! I wish it had been my lot to change from a human to this saurian. I am past middle age and the passions which plague a youuger man. Chueng Ching, who in his human shape was

vowed to celibacy and had devoted his life to science, is seeking a mate. He was never more lucid than when he roared to me that he had found a 'sweetie', the college slang of old days for a sweetheart, and demanded more food for strength he would need to fight off other males of his kind. With great sorrow, I must admit the end is in sight. He is indifferent to our researches and I gained nothing today but the account of this female sea-dragon, which seems coy and exhibits greater speed and endurance than Chueng Ching, as they tear through the depths, circling islands, lashing a riot of phosphorescence in the night. Oh, to see them! To find another and change from this body hampering me to a saurian like Chueng Ching!"

Cold sweat broke out on Willoughby's forehead as he took the last sheet from the typewriter, and re-read the bit which had fascinated him a little while before.

He understood perfectly what Denham had written, of the change over this *thing*. The brute body had conquered the mind of Chueng Ching. The ferocity of the sea-dragon was in ascendance. He had turned on Denham, no longer obeying the voice of the scientist. The remainder of the page held no less of horror, a prophetic intimation of Denham's fear.

"Chueng Ching is a fiend. He struck at me today with open jaws. I have sealed the complete notes to date, and addressed the results of my researches to the Royal College at Pekin, where they will act on the instructions to use the balance of Chueng Ching's wealth to pursue this investigation in case anything should happen to me. But Willoughby has arrived, and I am confident that the skill he displayed in the science class can be enhanced by practise so that he can perform the operation I desire. Chueng Ching laughed when I told him my plan, but promised to entice another male of his kind to the pool where Willoughby and I shall trap him by means of the iron-barred gateways dropped behind this sea-dragon we used as a body for the brain of Chueng Ching. I have not talked to Willoughby about it, but I noticed he seemed as well set up and fit as in college days. His reward shall be a share of Chueng Ching's wealth, and the fame of——"

Willoughby crushed the sheet in his hand, every nerve in his body on edge, his breathing sounding loud in the silence. The chair crashed over as he rose and stared past Wi Wo at the curtained doorway. The embroidered dragons seemed to move with malignant life. And a more terrible dragon inhabited this place, the madness which had caught Denham and made of him a priest of more dreadful rites than voodoo of the jungles.

Willoughby realized now for what he had been summoned by the scientist. He must escape or be caught in a trap from which there was no escape. He would find Denham, and tell him that he was going; Denham was at that moment near the pool. Willoughby remembered the chickens he had been killing, and his words: "Chueng Ching, hungry again. Such gluttony!" He remembered the sound as of water threshed by storm. Denham feared the thing, yet he had gone to it again. He might be in danger of his life. Common decency demanded that Willoughby try to save the man. As for remaining under the conditions to be imposed, his body shivered as if with nausea at the thought.

Under the vine-covered pergola, he was startled by the sight of Wi Wo in his white ducks. The hand of the Chinese fell on his arm, the man's teeth chattered like castanets. And above the

chattering and Willoughby's breathing, came the sound of water crashing on rocks, threshed under flails of no wind that ever was.

WILLOUGHBY stalked down the pergola, gripping his courage in his hand, assuring himself the typing was the fantasy of a madman, and that the worst he would find would be Denham in the violence of insanity brought on by loneliness and the eery mystery of the island. The heelless slippers of Wi Wo shuffled reluctantly as they came near an iron door, with light from beyond shining through the space between heavy bars. Willoughby saw the lantern on the stone floor. Steps led down. There was the crash of waves subsiding gradually, and a low moaning audible.

Willoughby opened the iron door, snatched up the lantern and began to descend the steps. A cool wind swept upward, a smell of sea-wrack and cavern chill. He saw the oily luminance of water where the sea filled a natural cove. It was stirred as by violent upheaval from beneath. The rock ledge below glistened with minute sea life. He saw something resembling a huge horse-collar slung to iron rings in the cavern roof, and a steel net dependent from ropes, the apparatus of that operation performed on the sea-dragon. Along one side was a litter of things scarcely discernible by the faint lanternlight.

With his scalp prickling, Willoughby held the lantern at arm's length, to learn what manner of gigantic bird it was that ran to and fro on the ledge, uttering squawks of fear which the cavern echoed. He saw a heap of dead chickens on the ledge; then a movement of Wi Wo caught his eye. The Chinese was retreating up the steps, backward, his eyes staring at the pool, his hands groping along the rock wall. Willoughby looked again at the pool, straining his vision to see what had thralled Wi Wo and turned his yellow skin green with terror.

It came like gushing light in the depths, stirring the black water, a radiance of glittering unrest, undulating flitter and shadow, faintly phosphorescent; then coils broke a moving swirl in the gloom.

Willoughby turned to run up the steps. The breath of Wi Wo hissed between his teeth. There was the silken slur of water washing the rock, and in another moment Willoughby was crowding the Chinese on the steps, for the water parted and a crested head was upreared, water dripping from fanged jaws, red tongue quivering, large glassy eyes regarding the two men on the steps with malevolent glaring. Coils of a serpent body upreared. Willoughby saw the great scales like iridescent metal plates. There was that threshing hiss of water, tremendous in the cavern walls. Willoughby's heart was pounding in his throat and wrist. Fear paralyzed him.

Then he screamed. From that great throat came a roar that swelled and boomed, and in that sound Willoughby heard unmistakably the name of "Denham" howled in wrath.

His own scream seemed to be echoed by the flapping white thing on the ledge. For the first time he realized that he had lost the chance for what he came to do: to save Denham. That was Denham—that mad disheveled thing clad in white ducks which was bent nearly double, waving its coat-tail over its head. It stood erect, laughing horribly.

"Chueng Ching," it called, "did you bring your sea-dragon? See, Willoughby is here, Willoughby who will make me invulnerable so we can rove the deeps together. . . ."

The rest was drowned in that howl of

the sea-dragon, a burst of laughter boomed through a gigantic throat, and the crested head swooped at Denham. The sea leaped, a wave shot by those armored coils crashed up the steps and over Willoughby. The lantern fell from his numbed fingers, the sea was in his mouth.

Then he felt the hands of Wi Wo clutching him. They were crouched in a heap on the steps. The pool was dark and the seas fell quiet. Willoughby felt his way a few steps lower and saw the outer archway of the cove. Dawn had bloomed, early tropic dawn shone silver. The ledge was empty. Denham had disappeared.

Willoughby turned and pushing the terrified Chinese before him went up the steps, clanging and bolting the iron door.

He strode through the house, looked at the sealed tube of notes addressed ready to send, and at the typed account of Denham's crime. Then he went to the porch.

A voice at his shoulder startled him: "You got one piecee ship, I go out 'long you." The plaintive wail was chattered through quivering lips.

"Come on," snapped Willoughby and ran down the path.

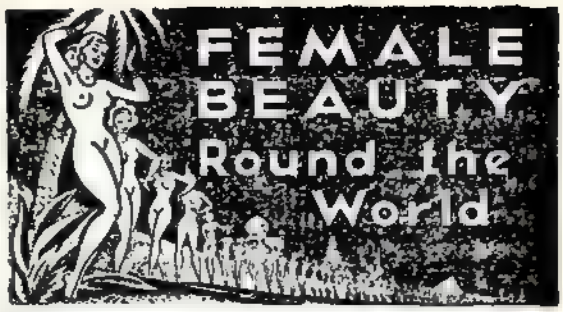
Along the palisade sauntered the Chinèse boatman. Willoughby took money from his pocket and offered it.

"Take us back to port," he commanded. "Quick!"

Polaris

(Continued from page 751)

shake off this unnatural dream of a house of stone and brick south of a sinister swamp and a cemetery on a low hillock; the Pole Star, evil and monstrous, leers down from the black vault, winking hideously like an insane watching eye which strives to convey some message, yet recalls nothing save that it once had a message to convey.



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WE TAKE pleasure in calling the attention of our readers to a new feature that we are inaugurating this month: a series of full-page pictures by Virgil Finlay, illustrating famous weird passages of verse. The first of these is based on a passage from George Sterling's *A Wine of Wizardry*—a passage so striking that Ambrose Bierce gave it rank alongside those famous passages from Coleridge's *Kubla Khan* and Keats's *Ode to a Nightingale* which Dante Gabriel Rossetti called the two Pillars of Hercules of modern human imagination. One of these Finlay illustrations will appear in each issue. He will draw his subjects from the whole realm of weird literature. Poe's melancholy Raven will appear here, and the angel Israfel, "whose heartstrings are a lute;" the Weird Sisters from Shakespeare's *Macbeth;* the Belle Dame Sans Merci of Keats; Longfellow's grisly Skeleton in Armor; Burns's Tam o' Shanter pursued by the warlocks; and many other gems of weird literature. Let us know what you think of this feature.

Here It Is

Gertrude Hemken, of Chicago, writes: "Once again I present myself in epistle-form. This time with thanks to David H. Keller for his *Tiger Cat*—the leddy in the tale had a fine way of getting revenge for that sad instance in New York—I appreciate Doctor Keller's finesse in letting the readers know how a woman can feel about being mistreated. One would almost believe a woman had written the story. I am all in sympathy with the Tiger Cat, although her demise did not sadden me. . . . Icky—one of those slimy tales—and by HPL—wooeey! *The Shunned House* was something far beyond my imagination. The more I read of Lovecraft's works, the more I see in them the modern Poe—by his minute detail of every angle—the history of the family which built the house—the exact description of the plot of ground in which this ancient dwelling stood (a person could almost draw a map of the site)—on such things I find HPL so very like Poe. I caught myself gasping a bit when reading of the containers of sulfur being emptied on that blasphemous slime and of the resulting fumes. Dear me, how awful it would be if such really happened! (And then the question comes to my mind that perhaps it did occur.) Although *The Homicidal Diary* was not the type of tale I now associate Earl Peirce, Jr., with, I did find it fascinating—very. What strange things dreams can do to one—and what strange dreams a person can have—and what strange things hypnosis can make one do. Gruesome? Yes—retchingly so. But why can't we have another on the order of *The Last Archer?* What about it, EP? Well, now, lemme see—dunno just what to say about *The Long Arm*—the whole thing just sorta disappointed me—wasn't quite nasty enough for my gluttonous taste. Gosh, I'm getting to be a real fiend. Thrills and adventure galore—do I like this *Lake of Life!* Am looking forward to the next installment and then for more yarns like it. Darkest Africa holds so many strange secrets—I find it more fascinating than the Orient. Mr. Hamilton has me on my toes wondering what the Guardians are and what force they have released on the ring of mountains to discharge instant death to trespassers. Wellman writes the most curious tales of the oddest things coming to life—well, sort of a tangible existence. Last time it was a parchment—now it's fat and bulging cherubs that just ain't cherubs. Nasty things, weren't they? *Here Lies* was a laugh-getter

—but!—what was so weird about it? Is my mind getting dull? The outstanding story in this month's issue—to me—was your reprint of Rich's *The Purple Cincture.* I could see those terrible glowing colors—angry colors—I could see them so plainly and could see the suffering of those afflicted—my nerves twitched as though that searing pain were severing my foot and hand—I didn't dare think of my neck. Now for the Eyrie—I can add no more to your answer to G. M. Wilson on his astonishing accusation—the very idea of him—how dare he do such to WT! —my gawsh—he doesn't read the magazine thoroughly enough. Good gosh—if a person is going to read WT with a grain of salt, how the deuce can he get any pleasure out of it? The idea is to leave one's mind open to all possibilities and forget how it's gonna end—the day is past and gone when the fair-haired boy rescued the beauteous maiden from a fate worse than death just in the nick of time. Some stories must end that way, but the people these days demand variety—and variety is what they get. One time the hero or she-hero dies or is overcome —next time they escape, but not unscathed—and mebbe the third time they run true to the old-fashioned style. If GMW has any old copies of WT and should he glance through them, he will find that he has been very unjust. I can say no more. Reginald A. Pryke of Kent, England, writes so grandly of Howard what I have never been able to express. Should I never keep a copy of WT—I'd keep this one for the fine tribute he has paid Howard and his incomparable creations of mankind. Let me take this opportunity to thank Mr. Pryke for a fine letter—I've read few as good in the Eyrie. Once again I ask—who is WC, Jr.? Sort of a WT Walter Winchell?—eh wot? I liked the random biography WC, Jr., gives of Clifford Ball—it's such things as these that we readers want to know of the authors—just bits of human news which we know will make them seem more real to us. Will we have more of such inside stuff—please?"

From a Spanish Friend

Jorge Thuillier writes from Havana, Cuba: "I have been a reader of WEIRD TALES for several years. I read it every month in Spain, my native country, and now that the great Spanish tragedy has driven me out of my home and to this island, I have

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kept on reading it here, as enthusiastically as there. I never wrote to you before, mainly because the great distance between our countries discouraged me, but also because I think all these readers' letters must be a bore to you. So I shall be brief. I only want to congratulate you for the ever increasing quality of your magazine, which now stands as unique in its kind. Being an artist, though not a professional one, I am really delighted by the very good drawings that illustrate the stories. I wish to congratulate Madam Brundage in particular, for the splendid picture she made for the October issue. The girl is the most fascinating representation of a woman I have ever seen. You forget the ghastly thing she is doing, when you look at her loveliness. Generally speaking, the whole magazine is a priceless gift for all lovers of the unusual and weird. I hope I shall be able to read it for many years to come."

Orchids to Mr. Pryke

Pete Thompson, of Seattle, writes: "My first fan letter. I have been reading WEIRD TALES for about three years off and on and really think you have finally reached the acme of perfection. *Tiger Cat* by D. H. Keller was tops in the October issue, as was *The Homicidal Diary*. . . . Orchids to you, my dear Reginald A. Pryke of Kent, England—your harangue on reasons for not reviving Conan, or any of the other brain children of our past master WT authors, hits the spot. Really I've wanted to say the same things. Thanks for putting into words what I've wanted to but lacked the ability."

Poe Outshone

George W. Skora, of Tucson, Arizona, writes: "A devoted reader of weird and science fiction, I have been reading WEIRD TALES for the last eight years. Although I am a singularly imaginative person, I do not read our magazine for the revolting, shuddery, terrifying aspect of its stories, but for the occasional tales, becoming more numerous of late, which translate me, mind and body, to some other age, or to some other world, where I can indulge my fancy in sword's-play, in adventure, in the mystery, romance, and superstition of another time or another dimension. Perhaps such reading forms an escape for me from reality and allows me, in my mind at least, to indulge and participate in the action of other periods. I am most grateful to WEIRD TALES for doing this for me. And these modern masters of weird fiction so far outshine Poe and his contemporaries that there is absolutely no comparison. It is as though a twenty-watt bulb were expected to shine the dazzling light of a carbon arc. Such tales as *Shambleau, The Three Marked Pennies, The Black God's Kiss,* all the barbaric adventures of Conan the Cimmerian, of Jirel of Joiry, of King Kull, and such others as the fascinating *Globe of Memories, The Last Pharaoh,* which was one of the greatest stories I have ever read, *Red Nails,* the masterful *Clicking Red Heels, The Carnal God, The Hounds of Tindalos,* all of the Northwest Smith stories, and in the present issue, the best of the Jules de Grandin stories, I believe, *Pledged to the Death,* which impressed me very favorably, all of these and numerous others will live for ever in my imagination, and I often go back and read them over to recapture their mood. Weird fiction has lost perhaps its two greatest masters, Howard Phillips Lovecraft and Robert E. Howard, and with them the heroes which they created have died. No more will Conan the barbarian fight from one end to the other of those mysterious half-legendary lands, no more will he woo and win fair maidens in his inimitable fashion, no more will he defy warrior and king alike, for the master pen which created him is no more and with that passing Conan is likewise gone for ever. I cannot conceive of his being recreated by anyone with the mastery of Robert E. Howard, and hence would rather see Conan dead as he had lived, a fighting-man who perished as he would have wished, sword in hand, the grim smile of desperate battle on his lips, in his ears the din of clashing blade and shouting men who felt its cunning edge. That world of his is gone. It would be blasphemy to attempt the rebuilding from dead ashes. And in closing, let me mention one more story which I will long remember: *The Fire of Assburbanipal,* a thrilling story if ever there was one. On rereading this letter, I once more feel the futility of mere words to say the things or express the thoughts that I really feel. You have one of the finest magazines, one of the finest staffs of artists and authors, of any publishing company in this country. And I do not say this with intention of flattery. I really mean

it and with sincerity. I would buy WEIRD TALES if it were a dollar a copy, much as it would strain my pocketbook. I have no faults to find other than the desire that Brundage would give us an occasional brunette on the cover of the mag, and I would personally like to see one cover in black and white merely for the striking effect it would give."

Like Rare Old Wine

Natalie Rockwell, of Syracuse, New York, writes: "How does an ungrateful little wench like myself express her gratitude for the really great pleasure you've given her in your incomparable magazine, WT? I've been reading your mag. for years (tho' I'm only 18), but I've never screwed up enough courage to tell you about it. Just finished your October issue to the accompaniment of a luscious thunderstorm. I always try to keep from reading it 'till I have the proper atmosphere. (It's a darned hard job tho' not to take a little peek at the intriguing book waiting my pleasure on the table.) *The Lake of Life* and *Pledged to the Dead* are tops in that issue. I've always liked Jules anyway. He seems to be so human and lovable. Now, even if this is my first letter, may I please make one little criticism? Brundage's gals are really delightful in form and coloring, and I love to copy them to see how nearly I can approximate her figures—but—her expressions are so terribly monotonous. I always know just what the faces will look like before I see the cover. It's the eyes that do the dirty work. No horror, no nothing in them. They look as tho' they were all poured from the same mold. Please, please for the sake of those who like to see really expressive features, put some life in the eyes. Now I've finished my ranting and raving and can only sit and wistfully think of the next WT that's so far away. Give us more and more weird, woeful tales of the same excellent quality of the past. Your mag. is like good wine that mellows with age and leaves a better taste every time it's quaffed.

Trudy, Beware of Oliver!

Henry Kuttner writes from Beverly Hills, California: "My vote for the best story in the October WT goes to *Here Lies,* a de-

BACK COPIES

Because of the many requests for back issues of WEIRD TALES, the publishers do their best to keep a sufficient supply on hand to meet all demands. This magazine was established early in 1923 and there has been a steady drain on the supply of back copies ever since. At present, we have the following back numbers on hand for sale:

1932	1933	1934	1935	1936	1937
....	....	Jan.	Jan.	Jan.	Jan.
Feb.	....	Feb.	Feb.	Feb.	Feb.
....	....	Mar.	Mar.	Mar.	Mar.
....	....	Apr.	Apr.	Apr.	Apr.
....	....	May	May	May	May
June	....	June	June	June	June
....	July	July	July	July	July
....	....	....	....	....	Aug.
....	....	Sept.	Sept.	Sept.	Sept.
....	....	Oct.	Oct.	Oct.	Oct.
....	Nov.	Nov.	Nov.	Nov.	Nov.
....	....	Dec.	Dec.	Dec.	

These back numbers contain many fascinating stories. If you are interested in obtaining any of the back copies on this list please hurry your order because we can not guarantee that the list will be as complete as it now is within the next 30 days. The price on all back issues is 25c per copy. Mail all orders to:

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lightfully satirical little piece; and I especially liked the illustrations for *The Shunned House* and *The Long Arm*. Trudy Hemken's reference to my bad grammar did not pass unnoticed, and Trudy may expect a call from Oliver, my pet ghoul, some fine evening. He told me he thought he'd drop in for a bite."

It Happened One Night

Manly Wade Wellman writes from New York City: "Mr. Joseph Allen Ryan's letter in October WT, anent the idea back of my short story, *The Terrible Parchment*, impels me to give the real genesis of the thing—even more unusual than Mr. Ryan's account. The idea came to me all of a sudden, rather late one night. I sat down at once and wrote it out roughly, with my apartment for setting and my wife and myself for characters. It was almost morning when I wrote 'The End,' and I laid it aside, then polished it up the following evening. After that I took it to Julius Schwartz, my agent. With him was Mort Weisinger. They glanced over the story, and their mouths fell open. 'Look here,' they said, both at once. 'Not five days ago we were discussing——' After that they told the story Mr. Ryan tells, of how they imagined the *Necronomicon* materializing through the combined mental effort of many readers of Lovecraft's tales. Yet neither had communicated with me, as both will be ready to testify. We laughingly decided it was a case of thought-transference—an unconscious mental message sent and received. I wonder if anybody has a better explanation."

A Conte Cruel

J. Vernon Shea, Jr., of Pittsburgh, writes: "The October number is another good issue. I read *The Shunned House* with a feeling of sadness, for the many references to Providence made it seem a post-delayed letter from H. P. L. The story is not quite of his best, for it has the over-slow approach and the lingering on technicalities that marked some of his last work; nevertheless, the culmination is startling, and the artistry veritably impeccable. I doubt if any of your writers will ever quite attain the high standard of Lovecraft at his best. *Tiger Cat* is one of the best things Doctor Keller has done, but the story falls into the genre of the *conte cruel* rather than of the weird tale proper. Nowadays the *conte cruel* is a little passé, for the horrors of war narrated in any newspaper far surpass the artificial horrors. Quinn's tale is better than usual, almost in the vein of his *The Phantom Farmhouse;* Wellman again rings the bell with *The Golgotha Dancers*, and Habl's *The Long Arm* is different. More European writers should be represented in WEIRD TALES. I read with distaste Peirce's *The Homicidal Diary*, an hysterical and cheap melodrama; to demonstrate its inadequacy, compare it with Mrs. Belloc Lownde's brilliant handling of a similar theme, *The Lodger*, or with such motion pictures as *M* and *Night Must Fall*. It occurs to me that the Eyrie readers might be interested in some statistics. For instance, which writer has appeared most frequently in WT? Quinn? Derleth? Howard? Why not give a chart, listing the most printed writers, and giving such data as number of serials, number of novelettes, number of short stories, number of 'short shorts,' number of poems, number of reprints?" [We fear that such statistical data would interest only a select few of our readers, and would take up space that could otherwise be used for stories.—THE EDITOR.]

Happy vs. Unhappy Endings

Clifton Hall, of Los Angeles, writes: "I thought the second part of Hamilton's new serial, *The Lake of Life*, was the best story in the October number. It reminds one a little of a dime thriller, but makes fascinating reading. *Tiger Cat*, by Keller, stands second, in my estimation, although I think it was a mistake to reveal the nature of the cellar's contents by means of the blurb and the two illustrations. Third spot, I think, should go to Quinn's *Pledged to the Dead*. However, I have one criticism to make in connection with the de Grandin series: if I'd had as many dozen hair-raising experiences with creatures from another world as Trowbridge has had, I don't think I'd have to be convinced during every new adventure that 'such things are possible.' Yet I cannot recall a de Grandin story in which the Frenchman has not had to argue for some minutes with his skeptical friend before the latter realizes that the improbable is not necessarily the impossible. Lovecraft's last was okay, I guess, but I didn't think the climax stupendous enough to justify the long and at times tedious building-up proc-

ess. *The Homicidal Diary* I considered to be the best of the others. The orange-haired creature on the cover stood out brightly against the dark background—an arresting bit of work. But how about another Finlay cover? It's been four months since his last. And now for G. M. Wilson, who says that WEIRD TALES is not an interesting book because everyone knows that everything will come out hunky-dory! I checked back over the stories—exactly 90 of them, including reprints—that have appeared in the ten issues dated 1937, and found out a surprizing fact. There was an exact split—45-45—between the happy and unhappy endings! Of course, it was difficult to definitely place many yarns in either classification, but in the end the advantage lay on neither side. It is improbable that in any other magazine can you find such an amazing balance in endings."

The October Issue

Julius Hopkins, of Washington, D. C., writes: "The October WT is a real treat for any lover of weird fiction. Two excellent stories vie closely for first place, namely: *The Shunned House* by H. P. Lovecraft and *The Homicidal Diary* by Earl Peirce, Jr. I am giving the slim edge to Mr. Peirce because in his story the horror is still at large and, furthermore, is of great current interest because actually the famous Cleveland beheader has not been captured yet, and not even any clues as to his identity have been found. *The Homicidal Diary* is written in plain convincing language and certainly does make your heart beat fast, especially in that scene where Jason Carse is rapidly becoming over-excited and the sharp butcher knife is close at hand. That's a real spine-chilling scene for you. *The Shunned House* is another typical Lovecraft tale written as only H. P. L. could ever have done it. The slow summation of facts builds a solid foundation for the surprize ending. The big horrible surprize, though so terrible it seems unbelievable, becomes a reality under the masterful handling of this marvelous writer who has sadly passed on into the great beyond. I award second place to *The Shunned House*, but this time second place is really a second first place. For third place I pick *The Long Arm* by Franz Habl. I enjoyed this yarn because it is something a bit different and it leaves in your mind the question of whether

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or not Banaotovitch is still alive. That's the kind of a thrill I like."

Hamilton's Serial

B. M. Reynolds, of North Adams, Massachusetts, writes: "You were certainly fortunate in securing that splendid yarn *The Lake of Life* by Edmond Hamilton, an exceptional piece of fantasy of the A. Merritt type, worthy of taking its place beside those two fine fantastic novels: Williamson's *Golden Blood* and Kelley's *The Last Pharaoh.* I believe that these stories will always be remembered by us, the readers. . . . Second best story in September was *The Ho-Ho-Kam Horror.* Stories of this type are particularly effective when written in diary form, and Mr. Bryan did a good job with this one. Good build-up and abrupt ending. Not a bit far-fetched, either, as Superstition Mountain, the heaven of the rattlesnakes, is a very real and tangible locality, as any Pueblo or Navajo Indian will attest, and the place is most certainly 'taboo,' at least for the white man. *Psychopompos* by the late genius H. P. Lovecraft was certainly unique, serving to make us realize still more the great talent that was lost by his untimely death. . . . Oh yes, I nearly forgot to compliment Henry Kuttner on *H. P. L.,* his grand tribute to Lovecraft, the finest piece of poetry since Howard wrote *A Song Out of Midian* about ten years ago!"

End of the Abyss

J. A. Murphy, of Augusta, Georgia, writes: "My, my, now just look what you have gone and done! Last month upon reading *The Abyss Under the World* I just knew that you had found another one that could be placed with the best of them. I went by the news stand every day or two waiting for the September issue to come in, and when I did get it, I had to read the finis of *The Abyss Under the World* before I even came home. And what do I find upon reading it but that you let J. Paul Suter go and put an ending like that on it! Why does anyone have to be like that? Now if they had really been transplanted into another world, and had followed the priest in his jump into the abyss, I think everyone would have been happier, because there would have been more thrills to come."

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., REQUIRED BY THE ACT OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912,

Of Weird Tales, published monthly at Indianapolis, Indiana, for October 1, 1937.

State of Illinois }
County of Cook } ss.

Before me, a notary public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Wm. R. Sprenger, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Business Manager of the Weird Tales and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily paper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption required by the Act of August 24, 1912, embodied in section 411, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business manager are:

Publisher—Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 2457 E. Washington St., Indianapolis, Ind.

Editor—Farnsworth Wright, 840 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago, Ill.

Managing Editor—None.

Business Manager—William R. Sprenger, 840 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago, Ill.

2. That the owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding one per cent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a firm, company, or other unincorporated concern, its name and address, as well as those of each individual member must be given.)

Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 2457 E. Washington St., Indianapolis, Ind.

Wm. R. Sprenger, 840 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago, Ill.

Farnsworth Wright, 840 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago, Ill.

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5. That the average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the twelve months preceding the date shown above is_____. (This information is required from daily publications only.)

WM. R. SPRENGER,
Business Manager.

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 23d day of September, 1937. J. G. WING,
[SEAL] Notary Public.
My commission expires February 15, 1940.

Random Notes by W. C., Jr.

What a break for the Washington Weird Tales Club! Seabury Quinn, who reads the fashion magazines so his heroines may be clothed stylishly, is shipping the furniture from Brooklyn to Washington. . . . As if to compensate for the Old Marster's absence from the skyscraper city, Earl Peirce, Jr., and Bruce Bryan may migrate to NYC, taking up writing as a regular profession. . . . H. P. Lovecraft's *Psychopompos,* "a tale in rime," was one of his earliest efforts, dating from 1917. . . . Virgil Finlay seldom uses models, but refers occasionally to photographs to get the right effect in picturing various textures. Virgil was born in Rochester, New York, twenty-three years ago. His first attempt at drawing occurred at the tender age of three, when the magnificently limned equine of his imagination was labeled "doggy" by his mother. He attended several grammar schools in and about Rochester; and his first real claim to fame was established when block-print caricatures of his teachers were reproduced in the John Marshall High School paper. He studied at Mechanics Institute classes and the gallery in Rochester. He has exhibited in oils, pen and ink, pencil, and block-print, and also works in tempera, transparent water color, charcoal, wood-cut, stone, chalk, and clay—preferring pen and ink to them all. Virgil is a quiet young man, unmarried, with a serious face that often lights up with a broad smile. Athletics in earlier years won him a fourteen-inch bicep and stubby, powerful fingers. He often spends two or three days on a single drawing for WEIRD TALES, beginning work around noon and ceasing only when dawn tinges the night sky. A dreamless sleep then shuts him from the material world until noon again, when he repeats the process. He has a keen sense of humor. And the way he plays practical jokes on his fellow Weirdists! For instance: Clifford Ball once stated in a letter to the Eyrie, previous to publication of his first story, that the ridiculous theme of a woman's being captured and carried off by a giant ape was passé. With this in mind, Virgil selected that particular scene in illustrating Ball's *Thief of Forthel* . . . What is perhaps his most famous drawing, the strange, dark illustration for Robert Bloch's *The Faceless God,* was the result of a dilemma: In the story there was little action which could be portrayed graphically,

NEXT MONTH

The Hairy Ones Shall Dance

By GANS T. FIELD

A STRANGE story is this—the story of a stage magician whose investigations of spirit séances precipitated him into the midst of an astounding situation. It is a tale of terror and sudden death, a tale of the hideous, stark horror that struck during a séance, a tale of the frightful thing that laired in the Devil's Croft.

THIS is an unusual story indeed, and one that will hold your interest throughout by the spell of its weird happenings. This shuddery novel will begin

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so as the only alternative Virgil took lines which Bloch had used purely as atmosphere! Virgil's favorites among his own drawings—of which he has done more than one hundred for Farnsworth Wright, including the Shakespeare work—include those for Seabury Quinn's *Witch-House*, Pearl Norton Swet's *The Medici Boots*, and of course Bloch's *The Faceless God*. He considers his conception of Sterling's vampire (in this issue) about the best he has done for WT, and is most enthusiastic over the poetry series it introduces. He is a Shakespeare and Milton fan. He generally does considerable research and experimentation in preparing for any particularly difficult piece of work. Before painting the cover for Speer's *Symphony of the Damned*, he modeled the three figures in clay and played lights on them from below in order to get the correct lighting effect. . . . Paintings and other samples of the media he employs are to be seen everywhere in the Finlay residence. His studio, of course, is full of them. An excellent portrait of his mother adorns the upper hallway, and still-life paintings hang downstairs in parlor and dining-room. The attic shelters a whole flock of them, while scores of drawings rest under tables and benches in the wood-working shop outside. The bathroom chest-of-drawers resembles a portable art gallery. . . . Virgil is a favorite correspondent of many notables in the fantasy field, as evidenced by the remarks they have passed in letters to me. To them he is weirdly known as "Monstro Ligriv." His high-school nickname was, curiously, "Hyphen"—an abbreviated form of the salutation, "Hi, Finlay!" He says his biggest thrill came when an old Italian he knew, after seeing some of Virgil's drawings, turned his back and crossed himself.

Concise Comments

Richard F. Jamison, of Valley Park, Missouri, writes: "If anyone is fated to equal Lovecraft's genius Henry Kuttner is that man. His stories have that indescribable *something* that every truly weird story must have."

Jean Van Wissink, of Chicago, writes: "If all pages of the October issue but those of *The Lake of Life* had been blank, I'd still have had my money's worth! Edmond Hamilton seems especially worth hanging on to."

R. N. Nicholaieff, of Chicago, writes: "Lovecraft's *The Shunned House* rates first place in the October issue. I read this tale three times just because I liked the way it was written. Lovecraft was indeed a master of weird fiction."

Seymour Kapetansky, of Detroit, writes: "No two writing styles could have been further apart than those of H. P. Lovecraft and Robert E. Howard, yet both were masters of weird fantasy. It's lucky we have such talented writers as Henry Kuttner and Robert Bloch to carry on."

A. V. Pershing, of Anderson, Indiana, writes: "Hamilton's *The Lake of Life* is weird and extremely interesting. As fine as he already is, he's getting better."

Edward Landberg, of Brooklyn, writes: "In 1931-32 you published two reprint novels, *Frankenstein* by Mrs. Shelley and *The Wolf-Leader* by Dumas, of which the readers disapproved. You then stated that you would cease to publish serial reprints. That was a mistake. If you don't mind my saying so, it was not the idea of the serial reprints that the readers disliked, although at first glance it would seem so, but it was the stories you chose. They really were not fit for a modern reader's consumption."

Henry Kuttner writes from Beverly Hills, California: "I enjoyed most of the tales in the September issue, and the ones I did not shall go unnamed. Bruce Bryan makes a highly auspicious debut, and his familiarity with his subject lent a pleasing air of authenticity to *The Ho-Ho-Kam Horror*. As for *School for the Unspeakable*, I've developed into an ardent Wellman fan since reading such little masterpieces as this and *The Kelpie*."

Most Popular Story

Readers, what is your favorite story in this issue? If you have any likes and dislikes, we shall be glad to hear about them. Write a letter to the Eyrie, WEIRD TALES, 840 N. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, or send us a postcard, telling us what you think of this magazine. In the October issue, three stories are exactly tied for first place as this issue goes to press. They are *Tiger Cat* by David H. Keller, *Pledged to the Dead* by Seabury Quinn, and *The Shunned House* by the late H. P. Lovecraft.

COMING NEXT MONTH

KLAUS kicked aside the curtain at the doorway and looked into the darkness of the little house. A woman crouched cross-legged on the earthen floor, her hair unbound, her gown ripped open to expose her breasts. On her knees, very quiet, but not sleeping, lay a baby boy, and on the little breast there flowered a crimson wound. Klaus recognized it—a gladiator knew the trademark of his calling!—a sword-cut. Half a hand's-span long, ragged at the edges, sunk so deep into the baby flesh that the glinting white of breast-bone showed between the raw wound's gaping, bloody lips.

"Who hath done this thing?" The Northman's eyes were hard as fjord-ice, and a grimness set upon his bearded lips like that they wore when he faced a Cappadocian netman in the circus. "Who hath done this to thee, woman?"

The young Jewess looked up from her keening. Her eyes were red and swollen with much weeping, and the tears had cut small rivulets into the dust with which her face was smeared, but even in her agony she showed some traces of her wonted beauty.

"The soldiers," she replied between breath-breaking sobs. "They came and smote and slew; there is not a man-child left alive in all the village. Oh, my son, my little son, why did they do this thing to thee, thou who never did them any harm? Oh, woe is me; my firstborn, only son is slain——"

"Thou liest, woman!" Klaus's words rang sharp as steel. "Soldiers do not do things like this. They war with men, they make no war on babes."

The mother rocked her body to and fro and beat her breast with small clenched fists. "The soldiers did it," she repeated doggedly. "They came and went from house to house, and slew our sons——"

"Romans?" Klaus asked incredulously. Cruel the Romans were at times, but never to his knowledge had they done a thing like this. Romans were not baby-killers.

"Nay, the soldiers of the King. Romans only in the armor that they wore. They came marching into town, and——"

"The soldiers of the King? Herod?" . . .

You cannot afford to miss this mystic story of the Yuletide and a barbarian from the North in the Roman army; a reverent tale of the Crucifixion, and Pontius Pilate, and a hetæra from the house of Mary the Magdalene. This fascinating and unusual novelette will be published complete in the next issue of WEIRD TALES:

ROADS

By Seabury Quinn

——Also——

THE HAIRY ONES SHALL DANCE

By GANS T. FIELD

A novel of a hideous, stark horror that struck during a spirit séance—a tale of terror and sudden death, and the frightful *thing* that laired in the Devil's Croft.

THE WITCH'S MARK

By DOROTHY QUICK

Shamus O'Brien risked his very soul for the red, red lips of Cecily Maltby—a strange and curious story about a beautiful, evil woman with red-gold hair.

TOEAN MATJAN

By VENNETTE HERRON

It happened in the island of Java, that strange, weird, incredible thing that the natives fully believe, but the white man refuses to credit—the story of a tiger and a woman.

THE HOUSE OF LIVING MUSIC

By EDMOND HAMILTON

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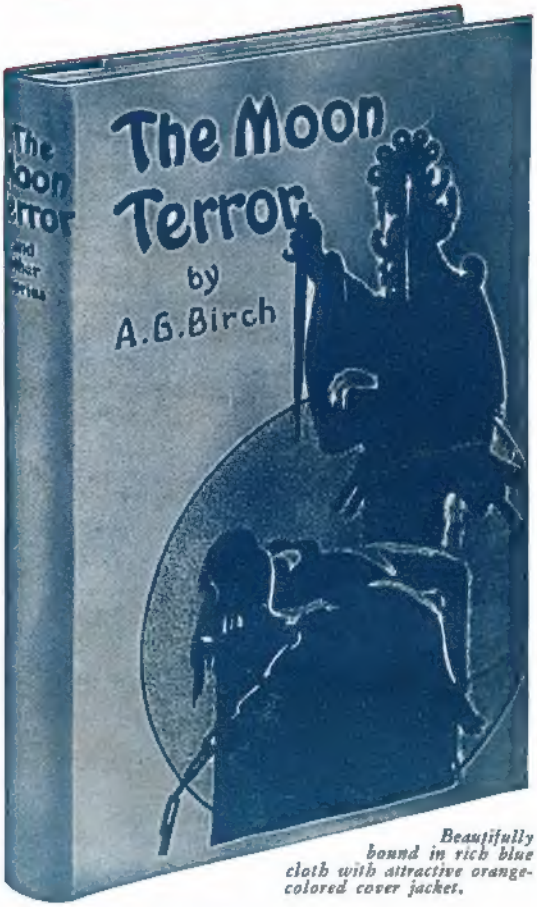

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